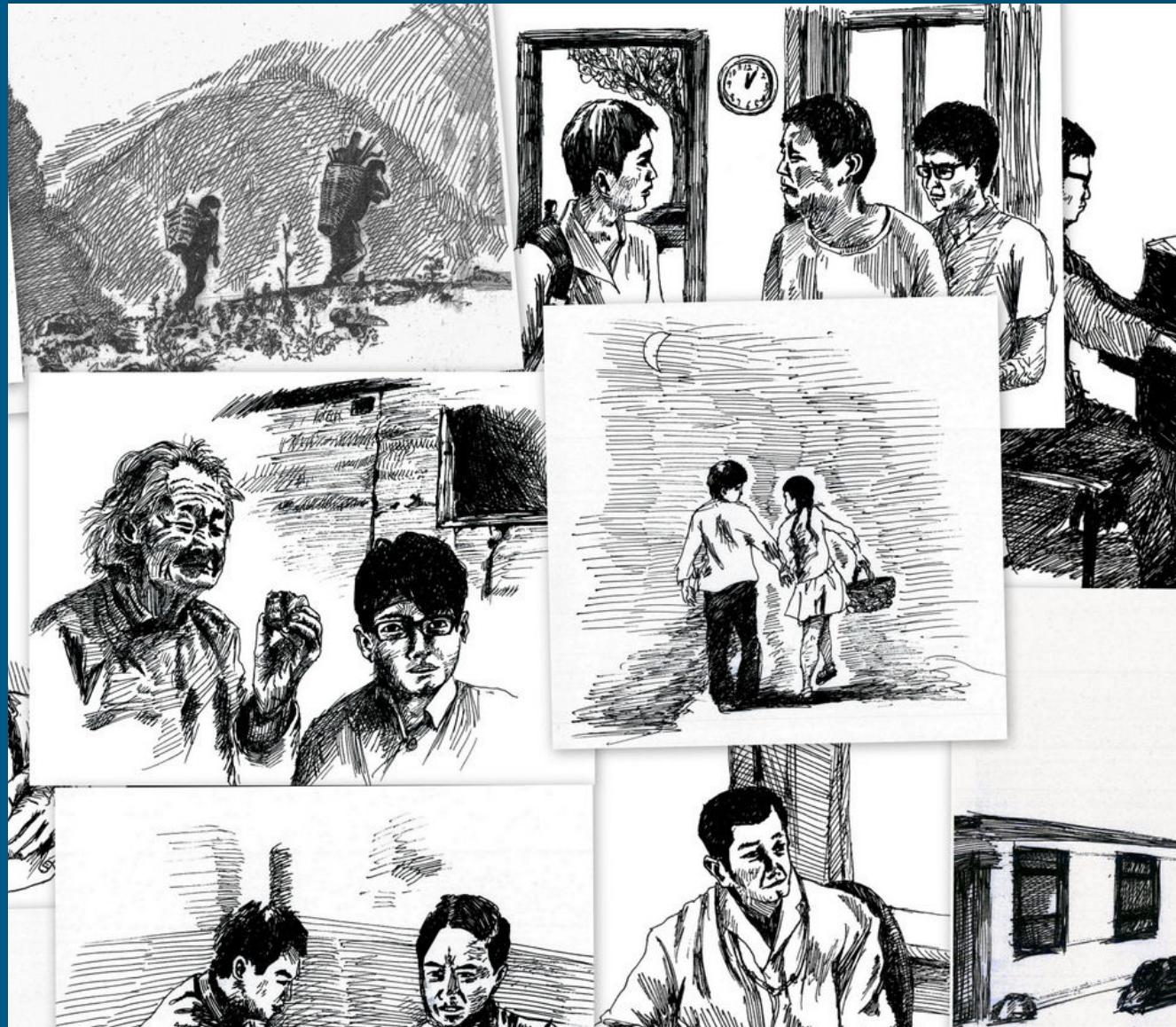


AN UNEXPECTED GIFT FROM THE GODS: BOYHOOD IN NORTHWEST CHINA

Yang Jialiang



上苍之礼:一个中国西北少年的成长故事

AN UNEXPECTED GIFT FROM THE GODS:

BOYHOOD IN NORTHWEST CHINA

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ASIAN HIGHLANDS PERSPECTIVES

Asian Highlands Perspectives (AHP) is a trans-disciplinary journal focusing on the Tibetan Plateau and surrounding regions, including the Southeast Asian Massif, Himalayan Massif, the Extended Eastern Himalayas, the Mongolian Plateau, and other contiguous areas. The editors believe that cross-regional commonalities in history, culture, language, and socio-political context invite investigations of an interdisciplinary nature not served by current academic forums. *AHP* contributes to the regional research agendas of Sinologists, Tibetologists, Mongolists, and South and Southeast Asianists, while also forwarding theoretical discourse on grounded theory, interdisciplinary studies, and collaborative scholarship.

AHP publishes occasional monographs and essay collections both in hardcopy (ISSN 1835-7741) and online (ISSN 1925-6329). The online version is an open access source, freely available at <https://goo.gl/JOeYnq>. The print edition is available to libraries and individuals at-cost through print on demand publisher Lulu.com at <https://goo.gl/rIT9lI>. The journal currently has a core editorial team of four members and a consultative editorial board of twenty-five experts from a variety of disciplines. All submissions to the journal are peer-reviewed by the editorial board and independent, anonymous assessors.

AHP welcomes submissions from a wide range of scholars with an interest in the area. Given the dearth of current knowledge on this culturally complex area, we encourage submissions that contain descriptive accounts of local realities - especially by authors from communities in the Asian Highlands - as well as theory-oriented articles. We publish items of irregular format - long articles, short monographs, photo essays, fiction, auto-ethnography, etc. Authors receive a PDF version of their published work. Potential contributors are encouraged to consult previous issues.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Yang Siyi 杨思义 (1951-2016).



QUOTES

Like most other human beings, I often ponder: Why do I exist? How should I live? What is the meaning of my life?

My life is not worthless. Everyone should be appreciated and each of us should be valued as a wonderful individual.

They had decided to give me to a rich family who would in return give them a truck.

Mother told me that I was an unexpected gift from the gods.

All along the long road of history, people in China have been ruled by those in higher positions, and it still holds true today.

Perhaps ordinary people you know seem busy just earning a living, but they all had dreams once. Everyone has their own story and everyone hopes they are on the way to dreams and happiness.

Since we had little money, we stole things that we wanted. In our minds, we were just like Robin Hood, robbing from the rich to help the poor. We often chose shops where the bosses looked mean, but we did not help the poor because we thought we were the poor.

Like many teenagers, I was sensitive and self-contemptuous at the age of fourteen and easily influenced by what others thought about me.

Doctors often prescribe far more medicine than needed, to increase their income. The more medicine patients buy, the more kickbacks they get from drug factories.

I don't blame anyone because human nature is complicated. What is important is that I am kind and fair.

"Though he treated you unfairly, you should forgive him because only if you forgive others can you get peace and freedom in your own heart," counseled Aunt Big.

I was very sad. Looking at the remaining fish in the pot, I felt life was the boiling water and Father and I were just like the fish.

Success meant getting a government job after graduating from college.

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NOTICE

The characters and events in this work are fictitious. Any similarity to real people, dead or living, is coincidental and not intended. Certain places have been invented and do not exist.

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Yang Jialiang (b. 1992), a native of Shaanxi Province, graduated in 2016 with a BA in English from Shaanxi Normal University. He continues to write creatively while teaching middle school English.



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NAMES

A

Aunt Big, my father's eldest sister-in-law

Aunt Hong, my mother's sister

Aunt Two, my father's second eldest sister-in-law

Aunt Yan, my father's cousin's wife

Aunt Ying, a village neighbor

C

Cai, my father's former neighbor. Her husband accidentally killed my sister, Jun.

Chang, a girl in junior middle school I was infatuated with

Chao, me

Cheng, my brother

D

Dan, Uncle Tang's daughter, my childhood playmate

Dr. Gao, a doctor in a local hospital who employed me as her daughter's tutor

F

Fayun, the village leader who tried to send my father to jail

Feng, my good friend in grade seven in junior middle school

G

Gong, my sister-in-law

Grandma Wan, Grandpa Wan's wife and Wan Lin's mother

Grandma Wei, my maternal grandmother

Grandpa Wan, my father's close friend, Wan Lin's father

Grandpa Wei, my maternal grandfather

H

Hai, my childhood playmate, his mother is Yin Xia

Hua, my classmate in grade seven who, with my help, became Peng's girlfriend

Hui, the monitor of my class in grade eight

J

Jian ling, Hai's step-father, who died from an explosion

Jiangang, a fellow villager

Jiao, Hai's second sister, my childhood playmate

Juan, my childhood playmate and the head of my herding group

Jun, my parents' first child who died young

K

Kewa, Mei's father, who followed Uncle Two as village leader

L

Lily, my mother

Lulu, a girl whose mother praised me on my first day at school

Luo, my classmate in grade seven who was very popular with boys

M

Mei, my best childhood friend

Meng, my classmate in grade six who excelled at English

Ming Le, my childhood playmate and a good fighter

Miss Su, my head teacher in grade five

Mr. Jones, my foreign teacher at university

Mr. Miao, my head teacher in grade nine

Mr. Pu, my head teacher in grade six

Mr. Shi, my second head teacher in grade eight after Mr. Zhang was
injured in an accident

Mr. Tang, Uncle Tang, my father's cousin

Mr. Yang, a businessman who employed me to tutor his stepson

Mr. Zhang, Miss Su's husband and my first head teacher in grade eight

Mrs. Li, my first teacher in primary school

Ms. Liang, my head teacher in grade seven

N

Ning, my deskmate in grade nine

Nai, my father's old neighbor who accidentally killed my sister

O

Old Wei, a villager in my village who became the village leader

P

Ping, a girl in my herding group, who worked hard and entered
university later

Peng, my good friend in junior middle school

Pang, my classmate in junior middle school

Pan, one of my roommates in grade nine

Q

Qi, my childhood playmate, Hai's stepsister

R

Rose, my foreign teacher at university

S

Shuai, Luo's boyfriend in junior middle school

Shuaishuai, my student, Mr. Yang's stepson

Sister Yan, my cousin

Sui, my good friend in senior middle school

T

Tian, my primary school teacher

Tianyun, my father's playmate who warned my father to flee

Tiemei, my good friend in senior middle school

Tingting, my primary school classmate

U

Uncle Big, my father's eldest brother

Uncle Two, my father's second brother

Uncle Tang, my father's cousin

Uncle Yan, my father's cousin

Uncle Liu, my mother's brother-in-law

Uncle Yuan, my mother's brother

W

Wan Lin, my brother's playmate

Wei, my classmate in grade six

Wei Xing, my brother's playmate, Old Wei's only son

X

Xi, my father

Xia, my best friend in senior middle school

Xiaoling, my teacher in primary school

Y

Yang, my roommate in grade nine

Yin Xia, a poor woman who married and moved to my village

Yong Chao, a handsome boy in my herding group

1

MOTHER'S PASSING

My name is Chao. I'm an ordinary person from a poor mountain village in northwest China. Like most other human beings, I often ponder:

Why do I exist?

How should I live?

What is the meaning of my life?

I believe my life is not worthless. Everyone should be appreciated and each of us should be valued as a wonderful individual. This is why I wrote this book - to record my life directly and share with others the narrative of my life - to provide a way for others to know another human being's life story.

Now, I will start my story.

My parents had two children. Brother was born in 1982 and ten years later, in 1992, I was born. When I was born, Mother was thirty-eight and Father was forty-two. I was an accident. My parents did not plan to have me. My parents had decided to give me away because they were afraid of violating the one-child policy and because they were so poor. They had decided to give me to a rich family who would in return give them a truck. However, at that time Brother was very attached to me. I guess he thought of me as his best pet. He cried a lot when he heard that my parents would give me away. His weeping made my parents heartbroken to the extent they decided to keep me no matter how many difficulties they faced.

Mother later told me that I was an unexpected gift from the gods.

To avoid the punishment from the government for violating the one-child policy, my father turned to his second brother, Uncle Two, for help. He was the village leader at that time. Uncle Two helped to keep my birth a secret from the local government until I was ten years old. Before that time, I had no official identify as I was not officially registered. The government was unaware of my existence until the Fifth

National Population Census in 2002. In consideration of cases such as mine, the government issued a policy to reduce the size of the fine. Father borrowed 800 *yuan* from the bank and paid the fine. This is how I obtained an official identity.

When I was in grade two of primary school, I changed my name from Chao to Jialiang by myself. I was inspired by a very popular TV series at that time that featured a main character named Jialiang, a very handsome hero. When other classmates laughed at my naïve adoption of this name, I said I wanted to be a hero, to support and protect my family like Jialiang did. When Father paid the fine and took me to register at the local government office, he accepted my choice and registered the name as Jialiang, but he still calls me Chao.

Our village, named Dongpo, is situated on a hillside. A gully more than fifty meters wide and forty meters deep divides the village through the middle into two parts. Eventually, dirt was packed into a section of the gully to form a bridge linking the two parts. The village has only one path and that faces two rows of houses. Most houses are made of adobe and wood. Only a few individual houses have bricks for their outer walls. In earlier times, the houses had only two rooms and large families lived in caves dug in the yard. Flowers and vegetables are often planted around the houses. For generations, the cultivation of wheat and corn has been an important subsistence activity. Apples are also cultivated for cash income. In slack seasons, to earn money, men transported stones by tractor from the mountains while the women did domestic chores at home. The village is ten kilometers from the nearest town, and connecting transportation is inconvenient. There are no buses. Private cars serve as taxis, but are expensive. Consequently, very few people take cars. In any case, traveling by car is very uncomfortable because the road is covered with stones and the ride is very bumpy. Most people rely on bikes.

The only road to downtown leads to the most beautiful building in the village. Made of brick it has three rooms. The village office is in the first room on the left. Next to it is a store, where villagers buy daily necessities such as salt, cigarettes, and gasoline for their tractors. Next to the store is the village health clinic where the villagers seek treatment when they are ill. The nearest hospital is more than ten kilometers away, so villagers go to the hospital only when they are very ill.

Although there are no rivers near the village, the government tapped underground water sources so every household has running

water. Unlike former generations, we no longer must carry water from distant wells.

The local climate varies a great deal from extremely hot in summer to extremely cold in winter. Spring and autumn each last less than three months. Winter is a time farmers stay on their heatable, hollow, brick platforms on which people sleep, eat, and entertain guests. During the long boring winter, men often get together to gamble by playing cards or mahjong while the women gather and gossip.

The first lunar month of the year is Spring Festival, and a time for villagers to congregate and enjoy the Chinese New Year. However, for my family, it wasn't a very pleasant time because we were so poor.

Father made a living by transporting stones by tractor trailer from the mountain and selling them to a factory that needs stones to produce lime. It was very heavy labor. Father needed to dig into the mountain to release the large stones. Then he used a big iron hammer to crack the large stones into small ones. Finally, he would lift the stones piece by piece until his tractor was full. Every single day, he made four or five trips doing this kind of work. My father was famous for his strength, but he earned very little.



The New Year custom dictates that every family buys various ingredients to cook delicious food to celebrate the New Year together. In 1997, when I was five years old, my family did not have enough money to buy meat. So, to buy some meat and a new suit of clothes for Brother and me, Mother sold our only goat, which was pregnant and only a

month from giving birth, to a rich family in my village at a very low price. Mother then spent all the money on food and clothes for us.

Even though New Year Day had just passed, celebrations continued. Three days before Lantern Festival, a time of union and happiness, Mother was again in bad health. We had become accustomed to her not feeling well, but could not afford to take her to the hospital ten kilometers away. There was a man in our village who gave intravenous injections even though he had no professional training. He was a driver who transported medicine from a factory to local hospitals and health care facilities. Once he became somewhat familiar with some medicines and how they were used, he ventured to try to cure patients. After some successful experiences, he became more confident and began giving intravenous injections. Gradually, villagers began to call him Dr. IV, which meant he typically used intravenous treatment.

He enjoyed this fame and used intravenous treatment more frequently. This is why we invited him to our home to treat Mother. As usual, he started a drip and claimed that his method was so advanced that whoever received this treatment for at least three days would soon recover and be healthier than before. In fact, he had no knowledge of medicine. He just injected patients with liquids containing glucose. Sometimes his patients did improve because they were malnourished.

This was the trick he played on Mother, who actually had diabetes. Our poverty meant that she did not receive proper care from a credible health care facility.

Father was not overly concerned about Mother. She seemed ill all the time and because we were too poor to afford better care for her, Father just got used to it. After injections from Dr. IV, Mother got a little better. She hugged me that night and said, "I feel much better. I believe I will recover soon. Early last winter, I met a monk who told me that I would encounter a disaster in my life next spring. I thought he meant this time."

"How could you know, Mother?" I asked.

"I can feel it," Mother said, smiling mysteriously.

"What will happen after this disaster?" I persisted.

"Everything will be better and life will be peaceful. Nothing bad will happen," reassured Mother.

I played happily with Mother's breasts, believing this happy time would be eternal.

The next day, Mother still felt poorly. Dr. IV came again and impatiently did his usual work. He was in a hurry to join a wedding at another village. After setting up the first drip bottle, he left three more telling Father to use them all. After the doctor left, Father told Brother to watch Mother and change the bottles as necessary. Father then went to a neighbor's home to gamble. At the very beginning, Mother felt nothing strange and lay on the bed peacefully. I wanted to change the bottles for her because I thought it was fun. Brother was fifteen and I was five. Brother felt the same, and really wanted to play with the medicine bottles. After a while, he got impatient and went to the yard and left me with Mother. After a few minutes, Brother called me and said he would show me some interesting toys.

When I came out of the house, I found him playing with the used medicine bottles and tubes injecting a tree with water. I found this interesting and begged him to let me play. He immediately agreed. As we were playing happily, Mother screamed in pain. We rushed back inside. Mother said she felt pain and asked me to fetch Father. I walked to the neighbor's house but when I told Father he dismissed me saying he would come soon. I guessed he had lost some money at that time and hoped to win it back. When I got back home, Mother in a very weak voice, asked for some water. Brother poured hot water into a glass for her and sent me to call Father again. This time I pulled father's jacket hard, but still he didn't come. Instead he gave me a small amount of money and told me to buy some candies. Even after I described Mother's condition, he still ignored me. When I got back home, Mother was unconscious. The untouched glass of hot water was still steaming.

Then Mother suddenly woke up, raised her head, looked at us with wide open eyes and suddenly fell back on her pillow, her eyes still open. Brother burst into tears and shouted at me to bring Father. Not really understanding what had happened, but knowing the situation was dire, I raced to the gambling place and shouted, "Father, Mother died! Please come home immediately!"

Father was shocked and asked what had happened. As I tried to describe Mother's situation, Father suddenly rose and raced home. He shook Mother, trying to wake her up, but to no avail. He ordered Brother to find the doctor and then rushed to Grandpa Wan, who had once been a doctor. He had treated patients with herbs.

Grandpa Wan arrived, checked Mother's pulse, and then sadly shook his head exclaiming, "It's too late."

Father wept harder than at any time before or since. Mother's death was like a bomb that shocked the whole village. Women who disliked Mother gossiped. Her friends came to our house and helped clean and dress Mother. They opened our chests and suitcases, and went through all the clothes to choose the best clothes for Mother.

Uncle Two, the village headman, organized men to dig a grave. Grandmother Mei and Grandma Wan oversaw the kitchen. Everyone had tasks. I had never seen so many people in our home.

Meanwhile, Father sat in front of the room with his head buried in his arms. Mother had been dressed and placed on some wooden boards in the room. I had never seen Mother dressed like that before. She looked good, except for her wide-open eyes. She wore a long coat, a pair of red trousers, and a pair of new cloth shoes with white cloth on the tip of the shoes, symbolizing her parents. An old lady put a coin in Mother's mouth and then covered her face with a handkerchief. I did not know why this was done, but I believed that Mother would get up at night and tell me some interesting stories.

Mother never received much formal education, but because my maternal grandfather loved Chinese classical novels, Mother knew many stories drawn from famous Chinese literature. For example, she often told me stories from *Journey to the West*. This novel is a collection of stories of how the Monkey King protected his master, the monk, Tangseng, while they were on pilgrimage to collect Buddhist Scriptures. Mother's stories were vivid and the Buddhist deities she believed in seemed to exist everywhere. For example, on the door, there were Door Gods. In the well, there was a Dragon God. Even a flower could be a god. She told me not to behave like the mischievous Monkey King or I would also be punished by the gods. She put an image of Buddha on the east wall of our room and prayed to it every morning.

Mother's influence meant that I, too, believed spirits were all around me. Once Mother told me that after centuries, a broom made of twigs tied around a stick could become a beautiful siren with long hair. This made me watch a broom for a long time waiting for it to become a siren. I learned how to make up stories and often told them to Mother. The night before Mother's death, I had told her, "This morning I met a group of ants. One ant died. The biggest one carried it to a small hole and the others came to bury it. After the dead ant was covered by dirt, the others did not leave but stayed there for a long time. I guess they were praying for it."

"Yes, you are right. How moving that such small creatures should be so compassionate," Mother murmured, hugging me tight.

As I was thinking what story I would tell Mother that night, Brother suddenly burst in. After his long bike ride in search of the irresponsible doctor, he was drenched in sweat. When he saw Mother, he burst into loud wails. He pulled down the image of Buddha on the wall and smashed it. Then he knelt in front of Mother and cried even more loudly. Brother had found the doctor in his home. He was so drunk that he had passed out and could not be roused.

Locally, corpses should be buried within, at most, seven days. However, Mother's death was unexpected and my family had a lot of things to prepare for the funeral, even though we did not have the money to do what was culturally expected. Uncle Big, Father's oldest brother, was a professor at Qinghai University and very much of a father figure to me. He promised to come to our aid in two days. Uncle Big, who was ten years older than Father, often came to help when his brothers got into trouble.

Uncle Two was four years older than Father. He could capably deal with relationships among villagers, and was well respected as village leader. He was business minded, so his family was the richest in this village, while Father was the poorest due to his ill-considered plans for life.

Father frequently despaired. He had made many mistakes that created great difficulty, and he did not know how to deal with the situation this time. Uncle Big reached our village on the third day after Mother's death. He first went to Uncle Two's home and was invited to a birthday party for Aunt Two's father. Uncle Big got seriously drunk at that party, thus did not reach my home until the next day.

When Uncle Big arrived at my home, he harshly scolded Father. When it came to the doctor, Uncle Big said, "Our family has been destroyed and we should not destroy another family. Taking this doctor to court will bring no benefit to us."

Dr. IV gave Father 3,000 *yuan* as compensation and Mother was buried uneventfully on the seventh day after her death. Many people I did not know gave gifts to show their sympathy. I felt good because so many people seemed to care about me. I felt I was the center of the world. I enjoyed it and smiled a lot. Then a woman shouted, "This child is so cruel that he constantly smiles after his mother's death!"

2

A NIGHT IN UNCLE BIG'S HOME

After Mother's funeral, Uncle Big decided to adopt me and discussed it with Father several times. Father agreed because he was too poor to rear two children. In contrast, Uncle Big was much better off and could provide me with a better life. I secretly listened to their discussion. We were having breakfast on an early, cold morning in spring, when Uncle Big came in. Smiling broadly, he announced that he would take me to have fun in Phoenix County Town, which is fifteen kilometers away from our village and around an hour by bike. I jumped with excitement and happiness. After breakfast, he put me on his bike and took me to his home in Phoenix County Town where I met Aunt Big and her mother. At that time, Uncle Big and Aunt Big were both nearly sixty years old.

"You should get my agreement before you decide," chided Aunt Big.

"I thought you would be happy to have this child," answered Uncle Big.

"Yes, I like this boy, but to bring up a young child like him is not easy," she said.

"I know, but we are retired and have enough time and energy to look after him," continued Uncle Big.

"I don't agree. It's more than just looking after him. He needs to be educated. He is so uncouth! We are old and we do not have the time and money to rear a child. We even haven't decided where to live now," protested Aunt Big.

Hearing this, I realized I did not like Aunt Big at all. She had been a teacher and in my mind, that meant she spent most of her time holding a stick and beating children like me. I was really afraid of her. I decided to try to go home. The best idea I could come up with was to behave badly so that they would hate me and send me back. I ran wildly into their small yard and desperately tried to get out of the yard. Once I

succeeded, I stood in front of the house, watching the cars pass by on the highway. Suddenly, I was caught by a pair of hands that belonged to Grandma, Aunt Big's mother. She was truly kind to me. When I stayed in Uncle Big's house, she cared about me a lot; she brought me her own coat to wear for fear that I would catch a cold and treated me with cookies others bought for her. She was about eighty years old and still in good health.

Nevertheless, Aunt Big continued to scare me. Once, as a result, I ran wildly for a whole day in the street and fought with a boy who was trying to steal the cookie that Grandma had given me. At night, I stayed in a neighbor's home watching TV, unwilling to return to Aunt Big's house. I usually went to bed around nine PM, but I stayed up until eleven that night, pretending I was totally obsessed with the TV programs. Actually, I hardly understood what was happening on the TV. When I was pretending to watch TV in the neighbor's home, Aunt Big came to find me. She apologized to the neighbors and took me back to her home. I rushed to the bed because I was so tired. Aunt Big stopped me and bringing a basin of hot water she told me to wash my feet myself. I told her that I couldn't because Mother always washed my feet. Aunt Big said that I should form good habits and take good care of myself now that Mother was gone.

"I told you this kid was very naughty. Did you notice his behavior today?" Aunt Big complained to Uncle Big.

"Maybe he's just not accustomed to this new life," offered Uncle Big.

"He even ran onto the street. There are so many cars there. It's really dangerous for little kids," added Grandma.

"OK, I'll send him back tomorrow," Uncle Big said, giving up.

The next day, Uncle Big bought me a mask of the Monkey King in the street and sent me back to my home by bike. Wearing the mask, I ran into my home happily. Brother rushed over and hugged me tightly, asking "How can you come back?"

Father burst into laughter and asked me "Who is this little kid with a mask? We don't recognize him!"

"It's me," I said, sitting on his lap.

From then on, Father never thought about giving me away again. He regretted that he had agreed Uncle Big could take me away. Father later poured all his love and blood into my soul. I'm so thankful to him and will never forget all the difficulties he suffered to raise me.

3

BROTHER LEAVES HOME

Brother was a good student and much loved by his teachers. Even several years later when I entered the same school and mentioned Brother's name the teachers fondly recalled him. From primary school to junior middle school, Brother was the class monitor. In primary school, he was greatly affected by what was happening at home in the family. After my birth, Mother had gotten progressively weaker and often needed to lie down and rest. Meanwhile, Father was busy collecting, transporting, and selling stones to make money. Consequently, the duty to look after me fell on Brother's shoulders. When I was three or four, Brother often took me to school with him. Aware of my family's situation, Brother's teachers said little about me being in their classroom. Brother told me later that I was very quiet during class time. Many teachers grew to like me and would play with me. I also knew many of Brother's classmates, who were also very fond of me.

Brother had many friends, most of whom were boys. At school, he was their leader. But among his playmates in our village, Brother was not the leader. Instead, a boy named Wei Xing, the only son of the scholar in our village, was the real leader of the village children. Wei Xing, who was the same age as Brother, was very smart. Whenever Brother got a new toy, Wei Xing could easily take it. Apart from Uncle Big, Old Wei was the only man in the village to have ever entered senior middle school. Villagers considered him to be a scholar. He enjoyed this reputation and, despite being just a farmer like the other villagers, he talked a lot about current news or policies as if he were a schoolteacher or high-ranking government officer. Another boy, Wan Lin, younger and less clever than Brother, was also Brother's close friend. He followed Brother everywhere and did what Brother ordered. His father was Grandpa Wan.

The relationship between Grandpa Wan and Father was complicated. Grandpa Wan was my paternal grandfather's cousin, so

Father should call him "Uncle" according to convention. At the same time, they were close friends. Father was twenty years younger than Grandpa Wan, who had four daughters, the oldest of whom was Father's age. Tradition dictated that a boy should carry on the family bloodline so Grandpa Wan and Grandma Wan continued having babies until the boy, Wan Lin, was born. As the youngest child in the family, Wan Lin was terribly spoiled. His four sisters were all married and his parents were in good health. Wan Lin's family was much richer than ours. Because Grandpa Wan and Father were close friends, whenever my family got in trouble, Grandpa Wan would help Father financially. Wei Xing, Wan Lin, and Brother were from different family backgrounds. Family education and personal experiences in later life had a strong influence on their fates.

It was after Mother's death that Brother began his third year of junior middle school. This was an important time for most village teenagers in my hometown. Those who passed senior middle school entrance examinations could continue studying in senior middle school and eventually have a chance to enter university. Those who failed the examinations generally returned home and lent a hand with the family's farming for a year or two. When they were older, stronger, and more mature they went to big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen to work. Generally, most would find jobs in factories although some also worked as waiters or waitresses in hotels or restaurants.

Brother was planning to take the senior middle school entrance examination the following summer. If he failed, he would return home and become a farm worker. Even though he was clever enough to pass the examination, Brother was still afraid that there would not be enough money at home to support him going to senior middle school. At that time, his junior middle school was ten kilometers from our house so he could not return home for lunch. As we neither had enough food at home for Brother to take to school nor could Father provide him with more than one *yuan* for lunch, which did not buy enough food, he just tolerated hunger every day. When Brother was collecting money from his classmates, he always hoped that someone might hand in extra money carelessly so he could buy more for lunch.

He felt hopeless about his future. His only pleasure was bringing me some happiness. He made toys for me and played all kinds of games with me. Whenever he got candy from his classmates, he saved it for me. This still makes me cry.

Father had debts at that time. Many men I didn't know came demanding repayment. As class monitor, Brother oversaw the class funds. Sometimes, under pressure from the debtors, Father would borrow money from Brother and later return it.

Before the senior middle school entrance examination, Brother collected the examination fee of eighty *yuan* from each student. Knowing Father had no money at that time, Brother did not tell him about the examination fees until the night before he was to hand in the money to the responsible teacher. He told Father that he wanted to quit school. Father did not agree and left to see if he could borrow the exam fee for Brother. But because he had so many debts, Father had a hard time borrowing money from anyone.

Brother understood the reality and though he was sad about it, he left school. He was the poorest in his class and knew that even if he passed the examination, the senior middle school fees would be more than Father could pay. Every time the school charged fees, which was often, he would become worried, sad, and embarrassed. Brother was only sixteen when he dropped out of school. He resolved to change our family's condition.

He went by himself to Qinghai Province, more than 900 kilometers away, to visit my maternal grandmother and stayed for a month. Uncle Yuan, my mother's only brother, gave him 200 *yuan* and encouraged him to use it to continue his study. Then Brother came back alone with the intention of returning to school but hesitated. He wrote to Uncle Big, who had returned to Qinghai Province, for advice.

Uncle Big was a senior middle school student before 1949 and entered university before the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). He was the first university graduate in our village and was considered very knowledgeable. In 1997 he retired from his university position and planned a new life with his wife, Aunt Big, a primary school teacher, who had retired several years earlier. Uncle Big wanted to return to his ancestral home to spend his final years. He wrote to Brother saying he would return to our home village in one or two years. He encouraged Brother to raise goats. Uncle Big further promised that he would invest in Brother's career.

Brother then spent the 200 *yuan* from Uncle Yuan to buy two goats. Though Uncle Two was the richest person in our village at that time, he never lent money to Father, worrying that Father would not return it on time. Uncle Two owned several goats and two cows. He

asked Brother to herd his animals as well, although he did not offer to pay Brother. We regarded Uncle Two and his family as our family so Brother agreed.

Once while herding, Uncle Two's two cows ran wild, entering a family's field, and destroying the crops. When the field owner demanded compensation from Uncle Two, Uncle Two furiously blamed Brother. Uncle Two often took advantage of Father and Brother. In 2000, Uncle Two planned to build a new house. Father and Brother worked for him for more than three months. Early every morning, he would come to our house and shout in front of the window to wake Father and Brother. Sometimes they felt exploited but believing that Uncle Two needed their help, they never refused until once one day I discovered a secret.

Late one evening on my way home, I met Jianlin who would die from an explosion three years later. He gave me an unopened envelope that he said belonged to Father and told me to give it to him. He had little education, and in fact had mistaken Father's name for Uncle Two's name. Thinking it was Father's letter, I assumed it was from Uncle Yuan or Uncle Big. As a primary school grade one student, I was eager to check whether I could understand a letter with the few Chinese characters I had learned. I curiously opened the letter but, to my disappointment, the only characters I understood were my brother's name on the second page.

When I got home, I gave the letter to Brother.

"What? Stupid! It's for Uncle Two. Didn't you see the name on the envelope?" Brother scolded.

"Jianlin said it was for Father. And I recognized your name in the letter too," I said.

"Let me check," Brother said doubtfully and then read the letter carefully.

...In your last letter, you said Xi [Father's name] had large gambling debts. I'm so angry about that. His children are still young and need good care. Why does he gamble? I will not pay those debts for him. He should be responsible for himself. You also said Xi's house was about to collapse. I'm very worried. What if the roof collapses? I will post 2,000 yuan to you to repair their house. Please keep the money yourself. Do not give it to Xi. I'm afraid that he will use it in gambling. And you also mentioned Cheng. He is just a child. If he makes mistakes, you should tolerate and teach him. He is a child who needs to be understood and forgiven. Thanks for warning me of the risks. I will reconsider whether to loan him more money..."

Brother knew that this letter was from Uncle Big to Uncle Two and Uncle Two had lied to get money. Father had not gambled after Mother's death and our house was solid and not about to collapse. Instead, Uncle Two had used the 2,000 *yuan* to build himself a new house. Meanwhile, he had complained about Brother's behavior to prevent Uncle Big from investing in Brother. Brother was sad and shocked by such evil. He revealed this to Father. But Father continued helping Uncle Two in building his new house until the construction was finished. Brother also wrote to Uncle Big to explain everything. He anxiously awaited his reply. After three months, Uncle Big's answer still had not come, but another letter arrived. It was from my Grandmother. She wrote that she knew it was too hard for Father to look after two children at the same time, that she missed Brother, and wanted him to come and live with her. So, again Brother went to Qinghai, where he has lived since the summer of 2000.

4

MY FELLOW HERDERS

With Brother's departure, Father lost his helper. His tractor was old and often broke down while transporting stones. Father was also getting too old to do such heavy work. So, he sold his old tractor and began herding Brother's two goats. I was in grade two in primary school at that time and I helped Father tend the goats over the next ten years. The original two goats multiplied to five two years later. I enjoyed herding.

It was a time when every family had one or two goats for milk. During school breaks, most village children went to the mountains to herd goats or cattle, and herding with the other children was the best part of life for me. We often brought homemade food with us. Buns, pancakes or baked potatoes, fruits like apples, pomegranates, jujubes, nuts and drinks like juice, tea or boiled water, were all shared among us. We also sang songs or played cards. It was great fun.

The leader of our group, Juan, was in grade six in primary school at that time. She was a gifted singer and dreamed of becoming a famous pop singer. She was very bossy and those who did not obey her were isolated from the whole group. Juan loved TV series, especially those from South Korea, which were mostly love stories featuring good-looking men and women. Every time we discussed such TV series, Juan's eyes sparkled. She also enjoyed talking and gossiping about fashion stars.

In her company, I learned many things about movie stars and singers. I dreamed of becoming a popular star when I grew up, but never thought about what kind of star I should be. I just wanted to be famous and earn a lot of money so that I could enjoy a decent life. Juan's talent lay in learning songs. Whenever there was a new TV series, Juan recorded all the songs and tried to learn them. After two or three days, she had learned them well enough to perform for us.

Later, in junior middle school, Juan had various love affairs and paid little attention to her studies. She often broke school rules. Before

the senior middle school entrance examination, she had a serious quarrel with a teacher and was subsequently dismissed by the school. After staying home for half a year, she went to a city and worked as a waitress for two years. When she was nineteen she met a cook, married him, and moved to his home in another mountain area.

At present, she works as a waitress in a restaurant and is the mother of a five-year-old boy. Her husband works in a factory in another city. The last time I met her, she was visiting her parents in the village and told me that she no longer believed the TV love stories.

Another girl in our group was Ping, who was in the same grade as Juan. Unlike Juan, Ping was a very hardworking student. She was quiet and kind to everyone, especially Juan. Juan treated Ping very politely and gently, while treating the rest of us impatiently, ordering us to do many things.

Ping once set a good example for me. One Spring Festival, on the night of the Lantern Festival, every child in the village went from house to house with a lantern and asked for candy or food. After that, our group gathered in Juan's bedroom and shared the food we had collected. We hung up all our lanterns, and played cards and games under the light. It was very peaceful and romantic. Ping wrote an essay about this experience and had it published. This inspired me to take up writing as a hobby. After junior middle school, Ping passed the entrance examination successfully and entered senior middle school. Three years later, she entered a medical university, becoming the second university student in our village to graduate since Uncle Big. She eventually got a master's degree at a famous university and did an internship in the USA for one year. Upon returning to China, she worked as a doctor in Shanghai. I seldom saw Ping after she graduated from university. Neither did Juan. Ping never said what kind of life she dreamed of, but she did get a life others desired. Ping and Juan, once a good pair of friends, created very different lives for themselves.

Boys in our group included Ming Le, who was the oldest in grade five. He was short but very strong and a good fighter. When I was in trouble, he helped me, especially when I fought with others. His father was in bad health and his only brother was mentally handicapped. His mother worked as a babysitter for wealthy families to support the whole family.

When he finished primary school, he stayed at home for four or five years, farming, driving, cooking, and doing odd jobs to make money

for the family. When he was sixteen, Ming Le joined the army and did so well that he became a military officer. Last year, his family home collapsed, and Ming Le spent all his savings on building a new house for his family. When I saw him last Spring Festival, he told me he was seeing someone who had been introduced by a matchmaker.

Yong Chao was the most handsome boy in our herding group. Although also in grade five at that time, he had already grown tall and strong. But he was lazy and excelled at taking advantage of others. He often played tricks on me, which made me hate him. Yong Chao's family was also very poor. He had two older brothers. His father and mother were about Father's age. His father worked in a lime factory and his brothers made their living by transporting stones to the lime factory. With just two rooms and a cave, Yong Chao's family lacked living space.

All the three brothers had similar personalities. They were lazy and cunning. Both his brothers married successfully without spending any money, which was envied by single men in our village. All three were adept at flattering others. When working in cities, they both sweet-talked their wives into returning home so that they could live there with their new girlfriends. After a year both wives had given birth. Yong Chao's elder sister-in-law left soon after she gave birth, while the younger one stayed. However, Yong Chao's younger sister-in-law did not respect her husband's parents at all. She acted like the boss of the whole family and often quarreled with them, providing exciting performances for other villagers.

Yong Chao's parents also had shortcomings. Yong Chao's father boasted a lot despite not having any achievements. Yong Chao's mother was short and fat. She often stole firewood and vinegar from others. I once ran into my house after being away for a while and was shocked to find Yong Chao's mother coming out of our kitchen with a basin of vinegar brewed by Father. She looked at me without embarrassment and said, "I would like to borrow some vinegar from you."

I had no choice but to lend it to her without asking for anything in return. Anyway, Yong Chao's family was a frequent topic of conversation. All the villagers knew they were cheaters and thieves.

After entering junior middle school, Yong Chao proved very popular with girls. He wore fashionable clothes and dyed his hair. He changed girlfriends every month. Each girlfriend would provide him with a certain amount of money while they were in a relationship.

After two years, Yong Chao quit school and went to Guangdong to be a peasant-worker. He has been there for ten years. Last Spring Festival, he, like his older brothers, brought a girlfriend home.

5

MY BEST FRIEND, MEI

I was the youngest person in my herding group, so I did the most herding work. All the other members had the right to order me about and I was also ready to be ordered. All along the long road of history, people in China have been ruled by those in higher positions, and it still holds true today. However, this also gave me the right to boss another child - Mei.

Mei was one year younger than me and did not belong to our herding group. She was my long-time partner. Our friendship began even before we could speak. I do not even recall when we started to play together because from my earliest memory she was there like my family member. I liked being with her as well as ordering her to do things. Mei's grandmother, an old hare-lipped woman, loved gossiping. Mei's grandfather was from Henan Province and good at business so he always had extra money to buy snacks for Mei. Mei's parents married when they were both nineteen. When Mei and I were little children, they were quite young, which explains why I called Mei's father "Brother Kewa." Mei's family was rich at that time and I was very envious of all the various delicious foods in their kitchen. But Mei was always generous to me and often gave me food or snacks.

Mei's family members looked down upon me and my family to some extent. Mei was told not to play with me, but she often came to my room anyway. We played all kinds of games. Once, before we attended school, Mei's father came looking for her to have lunch. He called her name loudly around the whole village but she never answered because we were so absorbed in games that we did not hear him. When Mei's father entered my house and saw we were playing, he yelled at Mei, "Are you deaf?"

Mei got up ready to flee, but her father caught her, kicked her to the ground, seized her ear, and pulled her away, disregarding her wails. Though that happened when I was five or six, it was such a horrible scene that I have never forgotten it.

Despite this beating, Mei continued to come to play with me in the afternoons. She was so "obstinate" that her parents largely left her alone when she grew older.

My first day at school was a year after Mother's death. Brother woke me up early and told me I should go to school. I took a new backpack, a gift from Uncle Two's daughter. I happily went to Mei's house where she was still eating her breakfast.

"What a great backpack! Are you happy to go to school, Chao?" Mei's mother asked when she saw my backpack.

"Yes," I answered.

"Has your father paid out all the school fees yet?" she continued.

"I'm not sure," I mumbled, my eyes downcast.

When I reached the classroom, I sat in the middle of the first row with Mei. While everyone else was chatting and laughing, I took out my notebook and started to practice the characters Mother had taught me.

"Just look at this boy. He can write so many characters. What a smart boy!" a woman shouted to her daughter after watching me at work on my characters.

"You are now classmates. Learn from him! Understand?" she said, touching her daughter's head and then she patted my head to show her kindness. Only Mother had ever treated me like this, so I felt extremely happy and warm.

After a bit, all the parents left and the teacher entered the room. A serious-looking woman in her thirties, she started handing out books according to a sheet. I anxiously awaited my turn but she did not call my name.

"Who is Chao?" the teacher asked.

"Me," I said shyly, standing up.

"Your father hasn't paid the school fees so you can't have these books now," she told me coldly.

I was so embarrassed that I wanted to sob. Suddenly Father appeared, walking through the door with big steps, and handed the teacher the required fees. After Father left, the teacher gave me the books. I understood I should cherish these books and study hard. Our first class was very simple. The teacher taught us three Chinese characters which I had already learned, and my handwriting was good. On the other hand, Mei had never learned these characters so she wrote slowly and incorrectly. The teacher hit Mei's head with a bamboo stick and railed "What a stupid girl!" Mei was so terrified she did not even cry.

I was also shocked and scared, and tried my best to do whatever the teacher taught.

Most of these little kids studied hard, however, some did not care at all, despite the teacher's threats. For example, Peng was very naughty. He grabbed Mei's pencil, and when Mei tried to get it back the teacher noticed. Mei told the teacher what happened and the teacher scolded Peng who caught up with Mei after class and started to beat her. I was not strong enough to fight him so I said that Mei had the "easy-die" disease and if he touched her, she would die and her parents would come to kill him. Peng stopped hitting Mei, but from then on, he used "Easy-die" as her nickname.

A few days later, Mei's mother, hearing the daughter of a teacher call Mei by this nickname, scolded the girl. Tingting, who was the leader of the girls in my class, retaliated by ordering all the girls to isolate Mei. This went on for two full years. But Mei did not care and just followed and stayed with me whenever and wherever.

In grade two, I was the top student in my class and the teachers were all very fond of me. Other students praised me, wanting to copy my homework, especially Tingting. So I wrote a note to Tingting asking for peace with Mei. After that Tingting and the other girls were friendly to Mei. I was very happy that Mei could then be involved with the girls.

In the summer after grade three, Mei went to her mother's native village to visit her grandmother for a month. When she came back, she had changed. She no longer obeyed me and even began to quarrel with me. Obviously, she had started to have her own views and thoughts. I did not like this at all. I thought I was losing her, that she no longer trusted me. At the same time, her family, especially her mother and paternal grandmother, did not like her spending so much time with me because Mei helped me with housework. They thought that I took advantage of her. Once when Mei was waiting for me at my house to go to school, Mei's mother rushed in holding a stick. Mei ran out pursued by her mother waving the stick. After this incident, I decided to stay away from Mei. But Mei soon forgot these unhappy things and visited me as usual. I then realized that I should respect her as a friend, rather than treat her as my servant. I changed my attitude and felt grateful for Mei's friendship and help.

We did many things together. One autumn when Father was ill, he told me to cut some grass for our goats. I asked Mei to accompany me. We had a lot of fun playing at this and that and then we went to pick

wild jujubes, leaving our bags of grass in Jianggang's wheat field. While we were busy playing, Jianggang's mother came to the wheat field. Her cruelty was well-known and few villagers liked her. At the sight of our grass bags, she screamed that we had trampled the wheat in her field. Although we tried to explain, she turned a deaf ear harshly scolding us. Eventually she left, taking our bags. I was upset because our goats needed the grass. As darkness fell, we had to return home with no grass. I decided not to tell Father, fearing he would get mad. Seeing me so sad, Mei suggested that after dinner, we would cut grass again. I was puzzled but agreed. It was very dark that night. There was only one star in the sky.

"Are you scared of the dark, Chao?" Mei asked.

"A little," I confessed.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Mei queried in a trembling voice.

"No, I've never seen one," I lied. Actually, I did believe in ghosts. "Do you see that bright star in the sky?" I continued, changing the subject. "It is Mother. She is looking at us from heaven. She will protect us."

I held Mei's hand to reassure her. When we got near Jianggang's wheat field, Mei said that we should take revenge. I enthusiastically agreed. We then cut a bag of wheat plants and on the way back home, we sang songs together in relief and happiness.

We were big TV fans. Mei and I were particularly interested in one TV series depicting a group of young people trying to escape the tight control of their family. We often discussed it and imagined running away from our homes one day. When the TV series finished, we decided to continue the story by ourselves. I was in charge of writing and Mei's duty was to detail the plots. We had a lot of fun completing three chapters together. I was ten and she was nine that year.

In the year we graduated from primary school, our teacher taught us a new kind of gymnastics we were to perform at the graduation ceremony. In the beginning, I was very bad at this so I practiced more, and invited Mei to join me. Every evening, Mei and I practiced for at least an hour. After several weeks, we had become very good at it. In fact, Mei was chosen to be the lead performer of our show, which meant she would become a local star. She then practiced even harder. During the actual graduation ceremony, Mei was so nervous that she made a small mistake while performing and, even though our team still gained first prize, she cried a lot afterwards. I understood her. I knew she was

not very good at her studies and could not get rewards there, so she needed and wanted to prove herself good at something. She had tried so hard for perfection that one small mistake had overwhelmed her.

After primary school, we had to continue our education in the nearest junior middle school, which was ten kilometers from our village. Every junior middle school student in our village needed a bike to get to school. Father could not afford to buy me a new bike, so I had no choice but to ride the old bike used by Brother. I felt very embarrassed when riding that battered bike because no other student rode such a shabby bike. Worse still, the bike often broke down. When that happened, I rode Mei's bike with her. She was always ready to help me.

Generally, when children in my region entered junior middle school, they started dating. Mei was the most beautiful girl in all five classes in our grade so she had many admirers, some of whom were tough guys at school. As I was often mistaken for Mei's boyfriend some of those guys would threaten me, warning me to go home alone or ordering me to keep away from Mei. This both angered and amused me. As Mei always scolded them and asked me to accompany her, I took no notice of their threats.

After the first year, Mei lived in the school dorm while I continued to live at home, and although we spent our vacation time together, we chatted less than we used to. She was very sociable and lively and had many friends whom I never knew. During that time, Mei did not pay attention to dating or to her studies, but instead spent a lot of time reading novels. In the end, I passed the senior middle school entrance examination successfully, but Mei failed. When Mei went to Shanghai and worked in a factory as a peasant-worker, I felt sorry for her because I believed that she deserved a better future.

Last Spring Festival, we met and spent an afternoon together. The special feeling between us was still there. We still felt like those two children walking in the dark, hand in hand. However, our relationship could no longer be so close because her family had started to arrange a marriage for her and I was also seeing someone.

I will always be grateful to her and be ready to protect her as a brother.



6

SISTER YAN

Sister Yan inspired me a lot and was one of the most important people in my life.

Sister Yan's father was the first son of my paternal grandfather's brother. Her father, a short, thin old man, had a close relationship with Father. They often helped each other with farming work. Although, many criticized him for being lazy and dependent on others, he treated me very kindly. He was like a grandfather. He often sat in front of his house with a cup of strong tea, enjoying the day.

Sister Yan's mother, whom I called Aunt Yan, was a tall, thin woman who was ten years younger than her husband. She often complained about her husband and had done so since they married. Aunt Yan was hypocritical, selfish, and boastful. There were funny stories about her. Not long after she married, she often pretended to be reading a thick book. Everyone in the village was impressed because few of their generation were educated and everyone initially believed that she must be well-educated. However, several days later at a meeting, the villagers were asked to sign a document and it was discovered that Aunt Yan could not even write her own name. This made everyone laugh.

Another time, when chatting with some women, Aunt Yan described how she had learned to ride a bike and had been injured. Villagers then believed that she could ride a bike skillfully and complimented her a lot because at that time, owning a bike was a symbol of wealth among ordinary villagers. Later, when the village leader needed to urgently send a letter to the post office, he asked Aunt Yan to ride the bike that belonged to the village to the post office. With great embarrassment, Aunt Yan finally confessed that she was just boasting and had never touched a bike.

When talking with others, Aunt Yan always praised her former village and criticized our village, implying she should never have married and moved. She was mean and selfish and though she did not hesitate to ask for help, she never wanted to help others. When I was five

years old, Father and Brother helped Uncle and Aunt Yan with farming work for a whole morning. A little before lunchtime, Aunt Yan went home and prepared lunch only for her own family members without inviting us to share lunch together. That time Brother nearly fainted from hunger. She also borrowed money from Father that she never returned.

Aunt Yan's daughter, Sister Yan, was totally different. She was born in 1984, and was eight years older than me. When I was in grade two, we started a good relationship, which began at the funeral of Sister Yan's grandfather. We all joined in that funeral. Sister Yan was very sad about losing her grandfather. She also realized that we shared something: she and I had both lost someone we loved. After the funeral, she invited me to her room and offered me some snacks. From then on, she cared about me a lot and I also enjoyed her company very much.

Sister Yan was very determined and straightforward, often quarreling with her mother, who wanted to drive me out of their house. Usually when I went to their home, Aunt Yan would pretend to be sweeping. She would follow me around waving the broom at me so I had nowhere to stay. Every time this happened, Sister Yan scolded her mother and asked her to let me stay. Although mean and selfish, Aunt Yan did listen to her daughter. Gradually, she accepted me and drove me out of her home less frequently.

When staying with Sister Yan, I frequently learned new things. She loved performing and longed to be an actress and by acting in school plays, she got practice and experience. By the time she was sixteen, she was very pretty and had a good sense of fashion and an ability to design clothes. Once she even designed a wedding dress from the curtains in her room. She was also a good singer. She knew many songs and believed that she could be a famous singer. She even organized children in the village and held a gala to celebrate Children's Day on 1 June. It was clear that she did not want a common village life.

Unfortunately, fate is often determined by factors beyond good will. In 2004 Sister Yan failed to pass the senior middle school entrance examination. That same year, Uncle Yan's only ox, the family's most valuable possession, got sick and died. The family's financial situation was dire. Sister Yan's only brother was doing business in Xi'an City borrowing more money than he could repay, which made the situation worse. Giving up her plan to take the examination again, Sister Yan went to Phoenix County Town to make money. She first worked as a waitress

in a restaurant where she fell in love with the restaurant boss. Although the boss was married, he eagerly pursued Sister Yan. Knowing he had a wife, Sister Yan did not respond to his expressions of love, but the boss did not give up. He told her that he did not love his wife anymore and had given up on his marriage. Troubled for a long time by her own family's dire circumstances, Sister Yan could easily understand his sense of despair. She comforted the man and gradually started to tell him of her problems and worries. When the man provided her with some financial help, Sister Yan was moved, and agreed to be his girlfriend while urging him to quickly finalize his divorce. As often happens with experienced tricksters, the man did not want to divorce at all; he just wanted to maintain a romantic relationship with Sister Yan. He pretended to be depressed in the very beginning to gain her sympathy. Once Sister Yan understood his deception, she left the restaurant and found a job elsewhere, at an Internet Bar.

The manager of the Internet Bar treated Sister Yan well. He introduced her to a young man, a strong, tall truck driver, whom she later married. The first time he saw Sister Yan, he fell in love and resolved to marry her. Sister Yan also had a good impression of this young man, whom she found to be humorous, which made her feel happy. Eventually she agreed to his wedding proposal and their wedding ceremony was planned for December 2009, when I was in senior middle school. Unfortunately, at that time Father was diagnosed with cancer and Brother took him to Qinghai while I stayed with Uncle Big for a while. Sister Yan phoned to invite me to her wedding ceremony, but Uncle Big did not give permission. It was a great pity because I lost the chance to witness this most beautiful moment that she had dreamed of since her early childhood. She did not need to design a wedding dress with curtains, but wore a real wedding dress. But otherwise all her fancy little girl dreams had vanished.

I did meet her several times after she married. Every time we met, she generously gave me one hundred *yuan*, and urged me to take good care of myself. Her salary was just 1,000 *yuan* a month. She is now the mother of a very cute four-year-old boy. She seems happy with her life. However, when I reminded her of her former dreams, she sighed and said, "What should I do next?"

Sister Yan once told me that we should live for our dreams rather than food. Though she failed to keep her dreams, she still inspired me to write this book and show the greatness of very common people. Perhaps

ordinary people you know seem busy just earning a living, but they all had dreams once. Everyone has their own story and everyone hopes they are on the way to dreams and happiness.

SPYING ON TWO FACTIONS

In 1998 when I was five years old, a miserably poor woman named Yin Xia married and moved into our village. She brought her two children with her. Her fate was wretched. She had already been married twice before she joined our village. Her first husband died in a traffic accident. He second husband died of a mental disease. After living alone with her two little children for two years, Yin Xia had been introduced to Jian Ling from our village. Jian Ling's wife had divorced him because of his poverty, leaving him with their ten-year-old daughter. Having lost two husbands, Yin Xia was considered to be unlucky by many village residents. Some religious people thought it was Yin Xia's inherent evil that made her two husbands die and were puzzled that Jian Ling had married her. Jian Ling ignored this gossip.

The children that Yin Xia brought to Jian Ling's family were Jiao and Hai, whose father was their mother's second husband. With Jian Ling's daughter, Qi, they formed a family of five. However, this family was not so happy because the couple did not trust each other completely. Yin Xia treated the three children unfairly. She spoiled her own children while she was cold to Qi. As the oldest child in her family, Qi was often told to do all the housework by her stepmother. Qi often took charge of cooking during school breaks and did all the family's laundry. Observing Qi's experience, I worried that Father would find a stepmother for me.

Jiao was seven when her mother married again. Her brother, Hai, was five, the same age as me. We became good friends soon after their arrival. I often visited them with Mei and they also came to my house to play. This upset my herding group. After her mother said that Yin Xia was an evil woman, Juan, the head of our herding group, decided to isolate Yin Xia's children as well as Qi. This created two factions among the village children. Children in each faction alternately insulted or ignored each other when they met. Juan even came up with the nickname, "wild cats," for Qi and her siblings, to mock them.

I was a spy between the two factions because I liked both. On vacations, I played with Qi, Jiao, and Hai. On school days, I often stayed with Juan's group because they were the majority. Qi did not mind me associating with Juan's group and never asked me to keep away from the other side.

On the contrary, Juan was very bossy and said if she found me playing with these "wild cats," she would ensure her followers shunned me too.

At that time, there was a beautiful, rich girl named Dan in Juan's group. Her father taught in the junior middle school and her mother was also educated. They all treated me very kindly, which made me envy Dan because I thought she lived in the happiest family in the world. In my mind, Dan was just like a princess so I really liked being with her. Because of Dan, I promised Juan that I would keep away from Qi's group, but I did not keep my promise from the very beginning. I told Qi that I was lying to Juan and I would be a spy for them and monitor Juan's group. Once they did any bad thing or spoke ill of Qi and her siblings, I told Qi immediately. Qi and her siblings trusted me and never talked with me in front of Juan's group. I enjoyed my spy life very much and took my self-assumed duty responsibly.

The war between the two factions was silent but serious. When Juan and Qi met, they did not quarrel but ignored each other. Juan and her compatriots often drew some illustrations or wrote slogans on the outside school wall to mock Qi's group. Qi often led her group to destroy Juan's work and play tricks on her. For example, when Juan's mother told her to watch their apple trees to prevent the fruit from being stolen, Qi and her siblings broke into the orchard while Juan was absent and stole apples, ensuring Juan's mother would punish her.

Once when Juan heard of a secret cave where Qi and her siblings stored firewood, she ordered Yong Chao and me to find the cave and burn all the firewood. I knew Qi's stepmother would harshly punished her if this happened, so I told our plan to Mei secretly and asked her to inform Qi. When Yong Chao and I found the cave, Qi and her siblings had already removed their firewood, so we failed to carry out Juan's evil plan.

The most impressive conflict between the two factions happened one afternoon when I was in grade one. After several days of heavy rain, a big apricot tree on the road from our primary school to the village, fell over. It was in June and the tree was full of delicious apricots. On our

way back from school, I was walking with Juan's group that included Juan, Dan, Yong Chao, and Ping. At the sight of the fallen tree, we became excited about collecting some apricots. However, Qi, Jiao, and Hai were already picking the fruit. So Juan announced that we should drive these "wild cats" away and ordered Yong Chao and me to fight them. Yong Chao did not want to fight girls and refused. I was also unwilling to fight my secret friends. At that very moment, Dan said that she had a good idea.

"Stop picking my apricots, you wild cats!" Dan commanded as she stepped in front of Qi and her siblings.

"What are you talking about? We did not pick any of your apricots," Jiao shouted at Dan.

"You stupid thieves. This tree belongs to my family. You are stealing apricots from our tree," Dan continued. Having understood Dan's plan, Juan also chimed in with her shouting "Thieves! Thieves! Thieves!"

"You're lying. This tree doesn't belong to your family," challenged Qi.

"You know nothing. You've been abandoned by your mother. How dare you say that, little wild cat!" Dan shouted back.

"Bitch. You're a wild cat!" Hai shouted at Dan.

"Get away from my tree, you wild cats!" Dan screamed and pulled Jiao down to the ground.

Qi pulled Jiao back up on her feet and left with her siblings. We then enjoyed the delicious fruit together. Juan complimented Dan's cleverness.

When we got to our village, we heard loud arguing.

"I thought you educated your daughter. She should have good manners. Look at my daughter's arm. It's bleeding!" hollered Yin Xia.

"I'm not sure what happened, but it can't be my daughter's fault," Dan's mother said.

"You should ask your daughter. Who taught her to call my kids 'wild cats'?" Yin Xia shouted. "What's the meaning of wild cats? What do you think of me? Did you think I was so weak that I would put up with you, bitch!"

"Can't you speak politely? I don't know what 'wild cats' you're talking about, you shameless widow!" Dan's mother responded.

"I was a widow. But I'm better than you, you evil bitch. I'll give you a lesson today," Yin Xia threatened, and walking up to Dan's

mother, she started beating her. They tried to push each other and pulled at each other's hair. Shouts and vile curses mixed together, making the fight especially vivid. Other villagers stood in front of their own houses, appreciating this dramatic live entertainment. Dan rushed over and tried desperately to get her mother away from Yin Xia. Dan's mother kicked Dan into their house and shut the front door tightly. The battle ended in a victory for Yin Xia.

From then on, no other women dared insult Yin Xia. They all avoided contact with her. Juan's mother warned her not to play with Qi and her siblings. The factions between children expanded to include adults. All this ended with the death of Yin Xia's third husband.

One day in the year 2003, I was playing with Mei when we noticed a group of people at the crossroads of our village. Out of curiosity I rushed over to see why they had gathered around a tractor that belonged to Jian Ling, who was lying in the tractor trailer with a very bloody head. People around the tractor were sighing and shaking their heads. In our village, most men, including Jian Ling, made a living by transporting stones for sale. To increase their supply, they regularly set off explosives in the mountains and early that morning, Jian Ling had gone with two other men to do just that. Two women supported Yin Xia as she came into the crowd. At the sight of her dead husband, she burst into wails, and begged others, "Send him to the hospital! Send him to the hospital!"

"It's too late," a man sighed.

I could see tears floating in Yin Xia's eyes, contradicting the women's gossip that Yin Xia did not love Jian Ling. After the funeral, Yin Xia vowed that she would stay in our village and take good care of Qi and her grandmother. Villagers respected her for that and started to be friendly towards her although the women continued to gossip that her inherent evil had caused Jian Ling's death.

Later, Qi wrote a letter asking Juan for peace and asked me to take it to Juan. When I gave it to her, I was happy, hoping I would no longer have to be a spy. However, Juan told me, "You guys have the freedom to play with them, but I have the freedom not to." I decided to welcome my friends openly and invited Mei to visit Qi's house with me. Later, we often got together and had a lot of fun playing all kinds of games in the small yard of Qi's home where her grandmother, a very kind old lady, spoiled us with all sorts of delicious food.

Two years later, when I was in grade six and Juan had married, Yin Xia broke her promise. She married a man in another village and took Qi, Jiao, and Hai to her new home, leaving Qi's grandmother alone. Qi was sad about her stepmother's decision but had no choice but to go with her. At that time, Qi was fifteen and in grade eight in junior middle school. Later, Qi broke up with her stepmother and returned to our village to be with her grandmother. The next year, at sixteen, she failed the senior middle school entrance examination, and then went to Shenzhen to make money. However, as she worked far from her grandmother's home she could no longer take good care of her. The old lady often sat on a big stone at the village entrance, looking south, waiting for her granddaughter. People often heard her murmur, "I've got many candies for the children."

When her grandmother died, Qi returned to hold the funeral. By this time, she had married a local Shenzhen man, who owned a factory and was very rich. I never saw Qi after that.

Yin Xia's new village was close to a tourist spot. She started a business with her fourth husband and saved some money. Jiao dropped out of junior middle school after Qi left. After assisting her mother in business for two years, Jiao married and moved to her husband's home in another county. I saw her on a bus after I had entered university. She was holding a baby and pretended not to see me. I don't know why. Yin Xia's son, Hai, who was my classmate in junior middle school, paid no attention to his studies, but formed bad habits including Internet addiction, fighting, and gambling. He was also one of Mei's admirers. After dropping out of school he became a construction worker.

Dan graduated from primary school, moved to the city with her family, and then attended a university very far from our home village. The night before I took the senior middle school entrance examination I stayed overnight at her apartment in Phoenix County Town. Dan told me her parents often quarreled and that was why she wanted to go to a university in another province far from home. Her father had now retired from school and her mother quarreled with him every day. The happy family I had once admired had ceased to exist.

8

PRIMARY SCHOOL AND TEACHERS

As I said earlier, my primary school life started in 1998, one year after Mother's death. I understood that I should cherish the chance for an education. Brother was in grade eight in junior middle school. Father was still transporting stones to make money. He owed a lot of money and other villagers often scorned Brother and me. We frequently encountered some cold eyes from our classmates and village playmates. For example, Wei Xing, whose father was thought to be a knowledgeable person in our village, didn't like Brother and spoke ill of him in front of their classmates. He told them our family didn't have enough food and Brother often did not have money to buy food or clothing. Juan laughed at my clothing and notebooks, while showing me her new toys or stationery. Fortunately, Brother and I also had faithful village friends and this reduced our sense of isolation and loneliness. Brother had Wan Lin as his best friend and I had Mei.

I attended the Village Primary School, which having been built in the 1970s, was in poor condition. After eventually collapsing in 2005, it was not rebuilt. The classrooms had been built from wood and mud, materials easily damaged by heavy rains. On my first day in school, my classmates were busily counting the holes in the roof that allowed us to see the sky clearly.

When I was in grade one, there were nearly 400 students in that school, but by the year I graduated, there were only fifty. The number of teachers, however, stayed at around fifteen. Most teachers in our school were farmers whose education had ended before they had attended senior middle school.

My first teacher was Mrs. Li, whose son was Brother's classmate. When Brother started primary school in 1988, she was already teaching there. She treated Brother kindly and often asked Brother to study with her son and to help him with his homework. Her son eventually entered

a military university and became an officer, while Brother had to drop out of school. Mrs. Li was in her forties when I was in grade one, and much more attractive than other women in our village of a similar age. Once she knew who I was, she treated me differently from the other kids. She made me the class monitor and gave me the right to manage other classmates. However, she was very strict and serious in class. She held a wood stick while teaching and would hit students who were chatting, fidgeting, or not paying attention. We were little kids and terrified of her. She taught us for two years. While we were her students, we hid when we encountered her outside the classroom.

Although she treated me better than the other children, I was still afraid of her. She was the authority and the only source of knowledge. Every student was expected to obey the teacher and do whatever she commanded. Once she pronounced a character wrongly and no one dared to correct it. Then everyone just followed her wrong pronunciation. When she noticed her own mistake, she got mad and said she made the mistake on purpose to check whether we were paying attention or not. But next time, when a student tried to correct her mistake, she just ignored him.

If we did not behave according to her commands, we were considered disobedient and immoral. The first time Mrs. Li asked me to copy exercises on the blackboard, I was surprised, but also proud, because I thought the platform at the front of classroom belonged only to teachers. Many teachers did the same thing when assigning homework. Since students had few books, teachers often asked their favorite students to copy homework exercises on the blackboard. Writing on the blackboard was a teacher's job, but it was given to pet students identifying them as superior to others.

Peng was the naughtiest boy in our class. He was jealous of me because Mrs. Li told me to write the exercises on the blackboard. In the children's eyes, this was favoritism. For this reason, Peng stole the teacher's reference book and copied the exercises onto the blackboard. Later, Mrs. Li punished him very seriously, which made other students think highly of me because they felt I was her favorite. Under Mrs. Li's protection, no one in my class bullied me. However, students from higher grades often bullied me. Older students enjoyed bullying younger ones.

One day in our break time from class, some older students came to our classroom and asked, "Who is the head of your class?" Everyone

silently pointed at me. I was then called outside and beaten by those older students. This happened so often that I started to fight the older students. They did not fight me as a group, but challenged me one by one, while others formed a circle, cheering. Sometimes I would win, but most of the time I was defeated. When they continued to torment me, I turned to Ming Le for help. He was in grade six and the oldest student in the school. He was also very strong so the students were afraid of him. After Ming Le graduated, I lost my helper, so I avoided fighting with others.

When we were in the second semester of grade two, we had a new teacher, Xiaoling. She was a very beautiful nineteen-year-old college student who had an internship at our school. Xiaoling was gentle and treated us in a friendly way. The students were crazy about her; she was very popular. She chose me and seven other students in our class to practice dancing for a performance competition on Children's Day. During the break, she talked with me and played games with us. Mrs. Li was very strict, so we all felt great relief with Xiaoling's teaching style. When she left after completing her internship, students sent her many gifts that they had made.

I sent her a postcard, saying "Dear Miss Xiao, although you stayed with us for a short time, we learned a lot from you. I will always miss you."

The first morning after Xiaoling's departure, my classmates were upset and silent when Mrs. Li entered the classroom.

"Do you miss Xiaoling? Let's invite her to teach you again, OK?" Mrs. Li said with a strange look on her face.

"Yes!" "OK!" "Great!" we chorused, not noticing her odd look. Instead, we just poured out our feelings.

"Then go find her now," said Mrs. Li.

I rushed to the office to find Miss Xiao, but she had gone. When I returned with disappointment to the classroom, Mrs. Li harshly scolded, "How much did she teach you? You said you learned a lot from her. Show me what she taught you now," Mrs. Li said. "Give me your book," Mrs. Li ordered.

After I handed her my book, she opened it, glanced at it, and said, "Look at your book. It's blank! She taught you nothing but singing and dancing. What's the meaning of that? You can't enter university by singing and dancing." As the other students laughed, I burst into tears,

my cheeks turning apple-red. Looking back, I realize that Mrs. Li was jealous of Xiaoling.

The next year when I was in grade three, our head teacher, in his fifties, was good at pretense and deception. He often asked us to hand in our Chinese language homework papers, which he never returned because he sold the papers for recycling. In those days, every student was required to pay a certain amount of money to buy magazines and newspapers. However, our teacher kept the magazines for himself, even though we had paid for them. Sometimes, he gave magazines as prizes to some students, but he usually sold them to recyclers.

He had a grandson who was our age. When he collected our toys in class, he kept them for his grandson, and did not return them. As our classroom was across from the headmaster's office we had many opportunities to see him sending gifts secretly to the headmaster. We all hated him, but the teachers respected him because he was very sociable and good at dealing with relationships between his colleagues. Fortunately, he retired when we finished grade three.

9

TIAN AND MISS SU

My head teacher in grade four was the vice headmaster, Tian, a handsome man in his forties. He was good at playing all kinds of musical instruments. We all liked him because he knew how to get along well with us. He organized various competitions in class, which captured our interest in his lessons. Tian had a good grasp of written Chinese and math. He encouraged us to write diaries to practice our writing ability.

I found him particularly sympathetic. He understood my family situation and was concerned about me. Once when the school charged some fees, I did not ask Father for the money because I knew my family had nothing - not even money for salt. Instead, I went to pick fresh pepper in another village to earn money for myself. After working an entire afternoon, I still had not earned enough to pay the fees. I was very sad and recorded this experience in my diary. Tian read my diary, secretly found me, and gave me some of his own money. He complimented me a lot.

I was very grateful and respected him more. I also admired Tian for his talent in music, especially the way he played the piano. I wanted to ask him to teach me how to play the piano, but I never dared.

When I was eleven years old, I could sing many songs correctly and fluently. Some thought I was an excellent singer. I loved singing. I had even thought I might be a famous singer in the future. Tian noticed my talent. When there was a singing competition organized by the government in our county, Tian wanted to train me as our school's representative, and arranged a three-day training program for me. He chose a well-known song - *Let's Row Our Boats* -and encouraged me to practice diligently. I sang while he accompanied me on the piano. My nervousness meant that at first I could not follow the piano notes very well. We practiced repeatedly until eventually I could follow the music. Then, to give me a better chance at winning, Tian changed the tune to a much higher octave, which required me to sing in a higher voice.

Tragically, by the end of the first day's training, I had lost my voice and was unable to speak for the next week. The training was of course canceled and with that my dream of being a singer vanished. I did not blame Tian. I just regretted no longer being able to sing well.

Tian's personality was not strong enough for him to be promoted to headmaster so he remained vice-headmaster until our school was shut down. But in many ways Tian was perfect. He was kind and had excellent calligraphy, painting, and music skills. I felt sorry that he was a teacher in an ordinary village primary school. I never asked what dreams he had when he was young, but I'm sure that he had dreams. I always thought he would achieve something big.



But even a good teacher like Tian was not free from gossip. I did not believe the gossip about Tian and Mrs. Li until one afternoon Tian's wife came to school. She was short and fat and looked much older than her husband. She sat on the ground in front of his office and cried

loudly. Tian sat in the office quietly with the door shut. From her laments, everyone understood. Teachers and students were shocked and then started gossiping about the relationship between Tian and Mrs. Li. Many criticized Tian on moral grounds, but I felt sympathetic. Compared to Mrs. Li, Tian's wife was just a plain village woman, who was humble but also rude. They were never a good match. I realized that Tian's marriage was unhappy and vowed never to marry a woman whom I did not like.

In grade five, twenty-three-year-old Miss Su was sent to be our head teacher. Our first encounter was embarrassing. I lived near the school, so the headmaster often asked me to help him watch the school gate on weekends. One Friday evening, it was my duty to lock the school gate. Before I did that, I had to check that everyone had left. When I approached the dorm for female teachers, I heard muffled groans inside. Not thinking too much, I pushed the door open and found two naked people on a bed. Miss Su was having sex with her tall, handsome boyfriend. They were shocked and embarrassed.

"What do you want? Why do you come to my room?" Miss Su demanded in a sharp, loud voice.

"I was just wondering when you would leave the campus," I murmured, my head down.

"I won't leave tonight. Go!" Miss Su shouted in a shaky voice. I desperately fled.

Having never seen Miss Su before, I guessed that she was a new teacher. I locked the school gate and left. The next Monday, Miss Su entered our classroom. I was sitting in the first row and she noticed me immediately. She treated me as if we had never met before. Later, I found she was an excellent teacher. She was very knowledgeable and, like Xiaoling, treated students like friends.

When she was free, Miss Su often sat in the back of the classroom. She liked to observe and learn how other teachers taught. She had a thick notebook full of notes about the classes. She also got a better understanding of her students in this way.

Miss Su cared about me. Seeing my old shabby clothes, she bought me a new suit and brought me many used-clothes from her brother. As usual, with the final exam coming, the school would charge exam fees. At that time, Father made a living by raising goats, our only income source. Several weeks earlier, having been given a counterfeit one-hundred-yuan bill after selling a goat, he had been unable to sleep

for three nights, which triggered his heart disease. Not daring to ask Father for money, I worried a lot and did not know how to respond when Miss Su came to collect money from me. Noticing my embarrassment, Miss Su led me out of the classroom and asked me what had happened. To protect my self-esteem, I lied that I had lost the money on my way to school. She held my hands, and said that the most important thing for a man was to be sincere. I was moved and cried as I told her the truth. She comforted me and paid the fee with her own money.

Miss Su was frank and outspoken. My classmate, Hui, was keen on reporting others' faults to teachers. Most students hated her because she loved finding others' faults and getting the teachers to punish them. However, when Hui tried to play her usual game with Miss Su, she herself received harsh criticism. Miss Su pointed out to Hui that she damaged her relationship with others by doing this. She told Hui to pay more attention to her own behavior rather than others. After that, Hui changed.

In the second semester of grade five, Hui's mother committed suicide by jumping into a well after a quarrel with her husband. Miss Su allowed Hui to live in her own room and comforted her until she felt better.

At the end of the year, Miss Su was to be sent to another primary school, which saddened us all. Before leaving, she bought every student a gift and encouraged us a lot, especially me. Miss Su told me that I should be confident about my life. She made me understand that confidence was the key to facing any kind of challenges.

A year later Miss Su came back to see us, just before she was going to get married. She brought her fiancé with her, the tall man I had "met" before. He was a sports teacher in junior middle school. They brought many candies to share their happiness with us. Last year, when I was waiting at a bus stop, I met Miss Su and her family again. She was as beautiful as ever and her husband was still handsome. She said I had not changed too much, but had become taller. She had her ten-year-old daughter with her. I joked, "Time flies. A decade has passed. Do you remember our first meeting?"

She glared at me angrily, but eventually smiled.

10

I GRADUATE FROM PRIMARY SCHOOL

In September 2005, after two months' vacation, I started grade six but was surprised to find that most of my original classmates had moved to other schools because of the poor condition of our school. The government had determined that our classrooms were in danger of collapsing at any time and we were forbidden to use them. Initially classes were held in the kitchen of a factory near our village but eventually, we (around fifty students from grades one to six) were put in four rooms where more than fifteen teachers taught us. My class, grade six, had twelve students.

Our head teacher, Mr. Pu, was a retired soldier in his forties. He taught us Chinese and often asked us to write compositions. Mr. Pu thought highly of my ability to write stories and encouraged me. Because it was our graduation year he also paid attention to our competitive skills, often arranging regular exams for us, analyzing our papers in detail. To further encourage competition and hard work he would also compare students, particularly Meng, Wei, and me.

At this time, Wei was twelve years old. His mother had died in a car accident when he was seven. Wei was very clever and often got full marks in math exams, which made me envious. Although I did well in math, I never got full marks. Encouraged by Mr. Pu, Wei and I competed in activities including ball games, singing, and dancing. Every exam seemed to be a battle between us. Wei was fond of showing off his good marks after math exams, and that made me even more jealous. Once, our math teacher gave us an unexpected exam and promised that anyone who finished the paper both early and correctly would get a prize. Wei quickly finished and handed it in before time was up. I was very worried about my grade.

After that exam, I checked my answers with Wei. When he pointed out one of my mistakes, I was full of regret because I had really wanted to get full marks.

When the math teacher asked me to get a newspaper for him, I went to his office where I noticed the papers we had handed in that morning. I hesitated, wanting desperately to change my original answer so that I could get full marks. In the end, I did not because I knew I should be honest. To my utter surprise, the next day the math teacher announced that I was the only student who had scored full marks, noting that Wei had made a mistake. I realized then that I should believe in and be more faithful to myself.

It was when I was in grade six that I began stealing. Our village was very far from Phoenix County Town, so I seldom went there. However, that changed in the summer of grade five when I learned how to ride a bike. Wei was always my companion when we rode to Phoenix County Town. Since we had little money, we stole things that we wanted. In our minds, we were just like Robin Hood, robbing from the rich to help the poor. We often chose shops where the bosses looked mean, but we did not help the poor because we thought we were the poor.

Wei and I competed in stealing. Wei was more fearless and swift and stole more than I did, and again I envied him. The ONE YUAN STORE sold all kinds of toys for just one *yuan* each. The boss was fat and short and always sat by the exit to charge customers. He hated children like us and often shouted, "No buy, no touch!" We ignored his warning and often stole from him.

One Saturday, when Wei and I went to Phoenix County Town again by bike, we parked in front of the ONE YUAN STORE, which was always our first stop. We squeezed into the crowded store. Examining the goods, I noticed a black watch which looked really cool. I decided to steal it. Seeing the boss looking away, I put the watch in my pocket very quickly and stepped toward the exit like nothing had happened. As I approached, the boss caught me by the arm and shouted, "I got you finally, you shameful little thief!" I was so terrified that I could say nothing. In fear Wei rushed out of the store. Surrounded by other customers, I was so nervous that my face flushed and my body shook uncontrollably.

The boss smacked me twice, but was then restrained by other customers. "He's just a child. Please forgive him," an old lady pleaded.

"This is not the first time. My goods often go missing these days. I have observed him for a long time," the boss said with frustration.

"But you can't say it is all his fault. Come on, forgive him. I'll buy the watch for him," the old lady offered, and fumbled in her purse for some money.

While the boss was taking money from the lady, I wrenched free and ran out. The boss did not chase me. I fled on my bike and rode back home with a heavy heart. That was the most shameful experience in my life. I resolved never to steal again. I was grateful to the boss because he saved me from becoming a much worse person. When I met Wei again the next Monday, he laughed at me for a long time and told my shameful experience to everyone. At the same time, he showed off what he had stolen that day. I was extremely sad and ashamed, but I never blamed Wei. It was my own fault so I accepted this humiliation.

The other student in this trio, Meng, was the youngest girl in the class and a very good student. Although Wei and I got higher marks, Meng remembered a lot of very practical knowledge about nature, geography, and English. While most parents did not pay much attention to their children's study, Meng's parents created a better study environment for her. They bought her many books to broaden her horizons and a tape player to help her learn English. Meng's English level was much better than ours at that time.

We did not pay much attention to English at all. Our English teacher could not read English fluently and often changed our English class into a PE class so in fact we had little English practice. However, Meng's experience was different. Her mother had attended senior middle school so she could teach Meng English. Thus, Meng could read and write English easily. I thought I should learn from Meng and asked her to help me with my English. She generously taught me a lot. We formed a good friendship by learning English together.

As the final exam approached, I became anxious about my study. It was the first time that the schools would rank all the students in the whole county by scores. I wanted to be the best student because it would bring me glory. I prepared very hard for the exam, as did Meng and Wei. Mr. Pu trained us strictly because he also wanted us to get good grades so that the local government would not shut down our school.

On the day of our exam, Mr. Pu arranged the seats making it easy for some students to copy from others. The examiners were teachers from another school. They did not know us at all. I was unhappy because I hated it when someone copied from me. The teacher arranged for Peng, the naughtiest boy, to be my deskmate. Reluctantly I accepted

this. During the Chinese exam, Peng bothered me by trying to copy my answers once the proctors' backs were turned. When the bell rang, I had not finished my composition. Knowing that I would surely not be the top scorer on the examination, I blamed Mr. Pu and Peng and for a long time I did not speak to them. Meng got the top prize and Wei's mark was also much higher than mine.

Since grade four, I had dreamed of publishing my own story in the magazines that we had often read with Teacher Tian's encouragement. I sent my composition to magazines several times but never got any answers. Before our final examination, I wrote a story about what I imagined my life would be like in twenty years describing also the changes in my classmates. I sent it to a magazine. After three months, while I was wallowing in depression for failing to be the best student in my county, I received a letter from the magazine's editor complimenting my composition and encouraging me to continue writing. I was very excited because I was the first and only one in my primary school to have a composition published.

Later, when the magazine was issued, all the students and teachers knew about my success. I suddenly became a star in our school and near-by villages. The teachers took pride in me and often asked who polished my composition. I answered that I had done it on my own. In those days, children and their parents admired me a lot. Everywhere I went, I met villagers who praised me and asked me how I got my composition published. I enjoyed that feeling, though people soon forgot about it.

Our school got high marks because most students scored highly on the exam but nevertheless, to our disappointment, the government announced the closure of our school. The "Primary School" vanished.

After we graduated Mr. Pu retired early and left.

STRUGGLES IN PRIVATION

In September 2005, I started my life as a junior middle school student. The school was five kilometers from my village so the students needed bikes. Every child in my village got a brand-new bike before they started junior middle school. Everyone, that is, except me. There was no money for my school fees, let alone a new bike. I rode Brother's old bike which was out of style. In school, you could easily judge students' background by their bikes. The first time I rode my old bike to school many students laughed at me derisively. I was upset and sad. Like many teenagers, I was sensitive and self-contemptuous at the age of fourteen and easily influenced by what others thought about me. However, I knew Father already felt a lot of pressure to pay my daily lunch fee of one *yuan* and that I should not expect more. So I just rode my bike nonchalantly when passing other students on the road.

The first month of junior middle school was full of rainy days. Mei's father found her a room in a relative's home so Mei avoided riding in the rain. However, two other boys and I had no such luck; despite the heavy rain we needed to get to school by bike. The two boys, like most other students, wore raincoats, but I had no money for a raincoat. Father found a leather coat which he had worn thirty years ago, and ordered me to wear it and a straw hat to avoid getting wet. Father was very concerned about my health. Unwilling to disappointed him, I promised to wear the leather coat and straw hat. Dressed like that, I felt like a clown. My strange appearance meant the other two boys refused to go to school with me leaving me to despondently ride my bike to school alone.

I also felt ashamed when having lunch. Father could only provide five *yuan* a week for my lunch and I dared not spend the money carelessly. I could not get enough food with just one *yuan* so I brought some steamed bread buns from home. At lunchtime, when everyone rushed to the dining room to eat, I would stay behind and eat my buns alone. I did not want to eat these buns in front of other classmates, who

were enjoying various shop-bought snacks. Feeling lonely and depressed, I suffered for a long time after entering junior middle school.

Although I had little confidence, I did, at first, try to speak to others but gave only short answers when spoken to. Seeing my strange behavior, many students did not like to talk to me.

Our head teacher was a twenty-three-year-old woman, who was famous for being strict. She taught us Chinese, but she also checked all the students' homework for all subjects. Every morning, she would sit in the front of the classroom and punish the students who had not finished their assigned homework. Sometimes she hit our hands with a stick while other times she slapped us with her hands. When she tired of hitting students, she thought of more creative ways to punish us. For example, she often asked two students who had not finished their homework to slap each other on the face. To avoid students cheating, she demanded that their slaps should be loud enough for her to hear them clearly. Under such pressure, students took their homework seriously. Consequently, our class's study results were much higher than others.

However, sometimes the head teacher had little power and, under the pressure of the school leaders, had to comply. For example, Peng was originally in another class but was so disobedient that other teachers could not deal with him. His parents heard that our head teacher was very strict, so they sent some gifts to the headmaster and begged him to assign Peng to our class. When informed of this decision by the headmaster, our head teacher protested because she thought Peng would disrupt the class. One afternoon when we were having English class, Peng's parents brought him to our classroom in the company of the headmaster. At that moment, our head teacher rushed to the door and stopped them.

"If you put this child in my class, I will resign as the head teacher of this class," she shouted.

"You should accept the headmaster's arrangement," Peng's mother said.

"I will never accept such an arrangement. Why on earth do you want your son to enter my class? He will make so much trouble for me," the head teacher complained.

"We believe you could make him behave better," Peng's father said gently.

"How about you take him home and teach him yourself!" our head teacher bellowed.

"Ms. Liang, don't forget your duty. You are a teacher and should not reject any student who needs you," the headmaster said.

"I take my duty to teach students seriously. Why do you bring an extra student to me? I don't want this troublemaker in my class," Ms. Liang said sharply.

In the end, Ms. Liang had no choice but to accept the headmaster's unfair arrangement. For a long time, she had been very tough and strict but on this occasion, as she wept, we felt sympathetic. However, Peng also got our sympathy because the head teacher had treated him very unfairly. Ms. Liang also ordered him to do a lot of jobs such as water the flowers, clean the classroom, and bring boiled water to her in a thermos.

At the very beginning, because I was the tallest in the class, I sat alone in the last row. The student seats were fixed and the teacher often arranged seating by height so students sitting in the front would not block the view of the students in the back. Now that Peng was a member of our class, he was assigned to be my deskmate even though a front seat would have been more suitable to his height. It was Ms. Liang's punishment for Peng, but also torture for me. Peng was talkative and impatient. He found it hard to concentrate so he often turned to me to talk. When a teacher saw this, they would throw a chalk butt at us and scold us publicly. Other students then laughed at us.

Gradually, I ignored Peng and tried hard to focus on study. During study periods when the teacher was absent, Peng was always the noisemaker. He played tricks on others or told jokes loudly to try and make the whole class laugh. Sometimes, he even set fire to his textbooks. I knew I could not be close to Peng. I still wanted to be the top student in our grade. I controlled myself and carefully took notes in all the subjects. Although I did well in homework, I dared not answer the teachers' questions during class because I was afraid of being laughed at if I was wrong. As a result, no one in my class believed that I was a good student. They saw me as Peng's deskmate and treated me coldly, in the same way that they treated Peng. Some students, who were considered excellent in study, often behaved arrogantly in front of me. Even the teachers suspected that I copied others' answers for my assignments.

We had to sit formal exams four times a year. Three months after entering the junior middle school, we had our first exams in Chinese,

math, English, and political knowledge. In the weekend after two days of exams, while teachers were scoring our papers, I hoped for good results. On the Saturday, while I was helping Father mill flour, I told Father that I felt that I was probably the top student in our grade, which meant that I was the best of 200 students who were my age in the whole town. Father was extremely happy, and said he could not dare to hope for that.

The next Monday, although I came to school as usual, riding my old bike and dressed plainly, I felt extraordinarily confident. During the first class in the morning, our head teacher announced that our class had the best exam results among all the classes, adding that I had scored the highest in the whole grade. Many students were shocked and turned to look at me, as if seeing me for the first time. I was very proud of myself, as was Peng. He cheered loudly, as if it was his victory.

The next day, the school held a ceremony to award prizes to students who had achieved high scores. The headmaster was very satisfied with the exam results and asked me to share my study experience. This was an unexpected invitation and Ms. Liang was worried that I would be too shy to speak. However, I was always ready for such a moment to prove my ability. I stepped forward to the stage and successfully gave a speech. During the speech, students murmured that I was the boy who wore a funny leather coat and straw hat. From then on, I resolved to keep my position. I wanted to be highly regarded by others. I might have been poor but at that moment I was very proud.

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FORMING NEW FRIENDSHIPS

Although Mei and I had been best friends since early childhood, after we entered junior middle school, we gradually drifted apart. Mei lived in the school dormitory so I would go to school without her. I was lonely but I gradually got used to it.

One afternoon, when I was riding home after school, a boy named Feng approached me and asked me if I was Chao?

"Well, nice to meet you. I read your article in the magazine. It's a good story," Feng said.

"Thank you. Which class are you in?" I asked, glad to make a new friend.

"I'm your class monitor! We've been in the same class for weeks. You still don't know me?" Obviously, my response had shocked Feng.

"Sorry. I do know you, but just couldn't recognize you clearly," I said sincerely.

There were more than fifty students in my class and since I sat in the last row, I did not pay much attention to the other students.

Feng was very outgoing and we soon became good friends. Raised in a rich family, he was generous and confident. Noticing that I ate bread buns alone in the classroom, he often invited me to his home to have lunch or brought me some food. But the most important influence Feng had on me was in building my self-confidence. Skilled at dealing with all kinds of things, he was a big help to the head teacher in managing the whole class. Our head teacher also obviously favored him. Every time she asked Feng to do something, he asked me to accompany him. I learned a lot from him, especially in how to behave properly in front of others. Affected by his polite and confident manner, I became more confident. Unfortunately, after that first year Feng moved to a city school. Though we met later in senior middle school, we were in different classes and were never as close as before. In the end, Feng

enrolled in a famous university. Although we are not often in contact, Feng remains a good friend.

Peng is another good friend, although he often upset me when we were in primary school. Peng's mischief-making earned him all kinds of punishments from teachers. He was just not suited to school and its many rules.

When we were in grade seven in junior middle school, puppy love spread like a contagious illness among students. These students knew very little about romantic love and, six months earlier when still in primary school, had behaved very normally. As the most renowned "bad boy," Peng needed a girlfriend to show off. Originally, he was crazy about Luo, the most popular girl in class. She was short but beautiful and so energetic that nearly every boy in our class, including me, pursued her.

The most common strategy boys used to win a girl's heart was the love letter. Luo received many letters from different boys each day, which naturally made the other girls envious. Peng was bad at writing letters, and begged me to write a letter to Luo on his behalf. Despite being Peng's deskmate, I refused, because I did not know how to write a love letter.

To please me, Peng gave me his new English reference book and promised to be quiet when I was studying. Knowing he would continue torturing me if I refused, I agreed. Peng bought colorful letter paper and I started. At the very beginning, I made up several sentences and then copied some poems to make the letter longer. This first letter did not move Luo. She did not write back.

Peng then persuaded me to write a letter drawing on my own thoughts, so I composed a letter expressing my own feelings for Luo. Luo was touched by the complimentary sentiments in the letter and the strong expression of love. She wrote back, asking the identity of the letter writer. Peng was so excited that he danced in front of me, as though he would soon marry Luo. When I replied that her faithful lover was Peng, Luo rejected him.

Although upset, Peng wanted to me to write another letter, but I persuaded him to change the object of his affection. I knew Peng did not have strong feelings for Luo. All he needed was a girlfriend. I then copied the first letter to Luo and sent it to Hua who was a very plain girl, but Luo's close friend. Hua accepted Peng's declaration of love immediately. While Peng was absorbed in the satisfaction of finally

having a girlfriend, Hua found out the truth from Luo and soon broke up with him.

In his second year in junior middle school, Peng dropped out and joined the army. Now subject to strict military discipline, he often phoned me, complaining. Although all his relatives thought that being a soldier with a 3,000-yuan monthly payment was a decent job, Peng insisted on returning home after two years. He is now married to Hua and busy creating a business with his wife.

And what happened to Luo? She fell in love with a boy named Shuai who came to our school after being expelled from school in Phoenix County Town. I still remember Shuai's appearance. He wore fashionable clothes and often had a dagger with him to scare others. On his first day at our school, he inquired who the most popular girl was. After expressing an interest in Luo, Shuai soon became her boyfriend. Then, after several weeks, Shuai dumped Luo and pursued Mei. This news surprised many students especially the boys, because they never imagined Mei could be better than Luo. Mei, who was beautiful, had no interest in puppy love and promptly told Shuai who nevertheless continued pursuing her for a long time.

Another girl I must mention is Pang. She was very short and thin from malnourishment. Unlike other girls who wore beautiful clothes, Pang dressed like a boy. In the beginning when she sat in the first row in the classroom, I did not notice her. Later, when eating buns in the classroom during lunchtime, I noticed Pang was doing the same. Then when I got the highest marks in the first exam, Pang was ranked just below me. I began to show her respect when we met from time to time.

I heard that Pang had been abandoned by her biological parents and then had been adopted by an old couple. Her family was poor, which explained why, like me, she often brought buns from home to eat instead of buying lunch in the dining hall. Maybe because of our similar backgrounds, Pang and I became close friends. We often studied together and discussed our problems.

After three years of study, Pang and I were the only two students who passed the senior middle school entrance examination. Pang worked extremely hard, which explained why she remained first in her class for three years in senior middle school. She eventually graduated from university and got a job in Shenzhen with an impressive salary of more than 7,000 yuan a month. We still maintain our friendship.

FATHER IS HOSPITALIZED

fter starting junior middle school, I no longer returned home for lunch. Instead, I took some buns to school.

A Father, who herded our goats and tended an ox every day, was too tired to cook just for himself. Without regular meals, Father's health became steadily worse. Due partly to his lung injury from an accident when he worked as a driver in Qinghai years earlier, Father also suffered from serious tracheitis. Every winter, he coughed a lot and sometimes spit blood. Because he had been very strong in the past, he ignored his health, thinking he would be better when spring came. Without extra money for medicine, he made his own. He put a snake gall in a jar of liquor and, when his cough worsened, drank several little cups of the liquor. This seemed a useful tonic that relieved cough and pain.

In the winter of my first year in junior middle school, Father's tracheitis became more serious. I bought various medicines for him from the medicine shops in the town near our school, but Father did not recover. The poorly trained doctor in our village advised Father to go to the hospital. Father rejected this suggestion and insisted on doing his self-assigned duties, ignoring his sickness. In December 2005, when he could no longer ignore his illness, he asked our neighbors to tend his goats and two cows while he went to the hospital in Phoenix County Town alone, with 800 yuan.

Patients at a hospital usually have a family member accompany them to help take care of them. I was in school so Brother came home to help. Brother's return helped Father get better, but maybe this improvement was only emotional because he was so happy to see his eldest son after such a long period of separation. With Spring Festival approaching, Father insisted on going home. He had not recovered totally, but thought he had already spent too much money. He also wanted to celebrate Spring Festival together with Brother and me.

Despite seven days in the hospital, once he left, Father quickly began coughing again.

Locally, there is a traditional food named *saozi* noodles. During Spring Festival, every family sits together to eat these noodles and dumplings, symbolizing reunion and happiness. However, the process of preparing *saozi* noodles is complicated and neither Brother nor I could do it. To create an auspicious New Year's atmosphere for us, Father cooked these noodles for us on the first day of the lunar new year. Although in high spirits and recovering a little when we were all together, his condition soon worsened.

Unfortunately, after two weeks Brother needed to return to work. Father then just lay in bed the whole day. After a meal, he would take a handful of pills. Doctors often prescribe far more medicine than needed, to increase their income. The more medicine patients buy, the more kickbacks they get from drug factories. The doctor had prescribed some expensive strong antibiotic which hurt Father's stomach. During the Lantern Festival, Father fell unconscious while cooking supper with me. I was shocked and did not know what to do. I just put Father on his bed. After a half hour, he regained consciousness.

"I'm OK, Chao. Don't worry," Father murmured.

"We should go to the hospital immediately!" I cried.

"Just wait for an hour and let's see how I feel," Father suggested, ever worried about hospital costs.

After another hour's wait, I urged Father again to go to the hospital. This time, he just silently nodded agreement. I prepared the necessities and with one arm around his shoulders, we started off to the bus station. As Father was extremely weak, we spent nearly an hour reaching the station - a trip that generally required only fifteen minutes on foot. After another hour, we reached the hospital.

The physician examined Father and then asked me into his office. "Where is your mother, child?" he said.

"She died when I was very young," I replied.

"I'm so sorry but your father is in a very dangerous condition. He could die at any moment. Please bring an adult here," the doctor said.

The doctor's declaration horrified me. When I calmed down, I thought it would be too late to call Brother so I returned to the village and went to Uncle Two's home. He had not said a word to us since Brother's departure.

"Uncle Two, please help. Father is nearly dead. He is in the hospital now," I pleaded.

"Don't be scared. I'll go with you," Uncle Two promised, seeing me so anxious.

On the way to the hospital, Uncle Two asked how much money we had left and the amount Father owed. When we arrived, Uncle Two asked me to look after Father while he went to the doctor's office. He understood I was just a little kid and that doctors did not dare tell me the whole truth. I followed Uncle Two secretly because I wanted to know what the doctor would say.

"The patient has a badly infected left lung. He can hardly breathe. The situation is really urgent," explained the doctor.

"I see. How much will the necessary treatment cost?" Uncle Two asked.

"It's hard to estimate. It depends on the patient's speed of recovery," the doctor said.

"Well, you know, we are very common, poor families. We can't afford much in medical fees. He is nearly sixty years old. If he is in great danger, it is better to abandon treatment, rather than spending too much."

"Treatment is necessary. There is great hope for him to recover soon," the doctor answered.

"Well, you don't know the reality. My brother lost his wife several years ago. He needs to do all kinds of labor, without anyone to help him. Even if he recovers, he must do many things that will easily cause him to fall ill again. Besides, we don't have much to pay for the treatment," Uncle Two.

This shocked me so much that I dared not breathe.

"You should consult your family then make your own decision," the doctor concluded.

When Uncle Two found me in front of Father's bed, I fully understood his plan. He asked me to have a quiet talk with him and we went to a garden behind the building.

"Chao, the doctor told me that your father is terribly ill and cannot possibly recover. I think we should bring him back home to look after him," explained Uncle Two.

"Well, thank you for coming with me, Uncle Two. I don't know what to do. What about letting Father stay in the hospital for several days to see if he will get better." I suggested hopefully.

"It's a good plan but it also needs money. The hospital costs at least 500 *yuan* a day. Do you have that much money," Uncle Two asked sharply.

"We just have 1,000 *yuan* left and I handed it all to the hospital. Could you loan some money to me?" I asked.

"You know, your cousin, Brother Xing, just opened a restaurant in the city. We lent him all our money. Your aunt and I even borrowed money from others to celebrate Spring Festival," Uncle Two said, sighing in despair.

"That's fine. I phoned Brother about Father's illness. I think he will send some money in one or two days," I replied.

Disappointed and embarrassed, Uncle Two said he would come to see Father the next day and left, but he did not come the next day.

Knowing Father was again hospitalized, Brother quit his job as a market guard and came back home with money borrowed from Uncle Yuan and Aunt Hong. He looked after Father for nearly a month. Father eventually recovered. I was just thirteen years old. It was a hard lesson in planning my future and understanding people's duplicitous nature.

BROTHER'S MARRIAGE

When Brother first arrived in Qinghai after quitting school, he lived with Mother's sister, Aunt Hong. She was very kind, treating him just like her own child. However, her husband, Uncle Liu, a government officer, despised Brother and was mean to him. He often spoke to Brother with a very cold, arrogant attitude, making Brother very uncomfortable. And he deliberately repeatedly asked Brother when he would return to his hometown, greatly embarrassing him. When our grandparents came back from Uncle Yuan's (Mother's brother), Brother moved to our grandparents' home.

At first, Brother just helped with housework. Later, Aunt Hong found him a job in a glass store, where although he worked more than ten hours a day, he earned just five *yuan*. Feeling underpaid and exploited, Brother found himself a job as a cook's assistant in a restaurant in another city where he lived alone. When my grandfather died, everyone blamed him, saying he should have been there. He then quit his restaurant job and stayed at home, taking care of Grandmother.

Eventually, Aunt Hong helped him start a business selling shoes so that he could work near other family members. Lacking experience, Brother's shoe store soon closed. He then got a job as a guard in the market where he had sold shoes. When Father got ill, he quit that job and came home to help. Back home, villagers kept asking Brother what he did, which embarrassed him. Villagers were fond of comparing the young men.

At that time, the male villagers who had reached the age of marriage were Wei Xing, Wan Lin, and Brother.

Wei Xing's father, Old Wei, claimed to be the most knowledgeable person in our village and had more money than most of us. Although just a farmer, he had been to senior middle school and talked about the European financial crisis, the war between America and Iraq, and the political changes in the Chinese government. This bored

most locals, because they did not understand these topics at all. This did not bother Old Wei, even though he knew the villagers could not understand a bit of what he was blabbering about. But he was sensitive about his reputation. For example, although for more than twenty years he had had an affair with Aunt Ying, a widow in her fifties in our village, in front of others he pretended to hate her, although they all knew about the relationship.

Old Wei was busy arranging a marriage for his son, Wei Xing, who was twenty-four years old and handsome, but who had a bad reputation because he loved gambling and changed girlfriends often. Gossip spread that Wei Xing had even been a drug addict. Old Wei was ashamed of his son's behavior because it damaged his own reputation. He consulted well-known matchmakers, but once a girl's family learned about Wei Xing's reputation, they refused to consider a match.

When finally there was news of a young widow whose husband had died in car accident a year earlier, Old Wei asked a matchmaker to propose to that widow on his son's behalf. After she agreed, he planned a big wedding, hoping his son would focus on starting a career.

Wan Lin's story was different. As the youngest in his family and the only son, Wan Lin, was spoiled by his parents. When he dropped out of junior middle school, he was sent to learn how to cook. After graduating from a vocational school, he found a job as a cook in the local government dining hall where he fell in love with a married woman who also worked there.

One morning at five-thirty am, as I was about to go to school, a group of men entered our house. Father and I were both shocked, not knowing what they wanted. One of the men politely introduced himself and asked where Wan Lin's family lived. Those men then knocked on Wan Lin's door loudly.

"Who is it?" Wan Lin's mother asked.

There was no answer, only louder knocking. After half an hour, Wan Lin's mother opened the door.

"What do you want?"

"You'd better ask your son,"

"My son has not recently been here," she said.

"Come on! We followed him last night. How dare you lie to us," mocked one of the men.

"Why do you want my son?"

"He seduced my wife and brought her to your home last night. We have called the police. They will arrive soon. Tell him to set my wife free now," the man demanded loudly.

"I haven't seen your wife. Go somewhere else to look for her," ordered Wan Lin's mother as she attempted to close the door.

The man pushed open the door saying, "Let us in to check."

Immediately, the men rushed in. After searching every corner of the house including even the roof, they had found no trace of Wan Lin and his girlfriend. As they left the house, some suggested that they might have hidden in a neighbor's house so they knocked on Aunt Ying's door. Aunt Ying was a short, smart woman whose husband had died twenty years earlier. She had started a business to support herself and her son and daughter. In her fifties, she married again, but divorced after a year. She was the only woman in the village who smoked. Although other women thought she was evil, they dared not speak ill of her because she was a tough woman.

"Who are you?" Aunt Ying asked.

"We are looking for Wan Lin. Someone said he hid in your house. We want to have a look."

"Are you policemen? Am I under suspicion? How ridiculous you are," she shot back.

"Well, lady, my wife was seduced by Wan Lin and I'm afraid they hid in your house without your permission. Let's search together," a man insisted.

"How could I let that old bitch's son in my house. She has always treated me badly. I have hated her for years. You should search her house. There is a cave behind her house. Have you searched there?" Aunt Ying suggested.

"No, we know nothing about a cave," one of the men replied.

"Then go and search inside. It is big enough to hold two people. I must close the door now because my grandson is sleeping. I don't want him to waken. What a shameless old bitch. Only she could raise such a bad son. I hope you find your wife. Good luck," and with that, Aunt Ying concluded and closed the door tightly.

Of course, these men found nobody in the cave behind Wan Lin's house. With great disappointment, they left silently. That evening, I saw Wan Lin leaving Aunt Ying's house with a young woman. Aunt Ying had saved the two poor lovers. In time, the woman divorced her husband and several months later, obviously pregnant, married Wan Lin.

After Wei Xing and Wan Lin had both found partners and married, Father started to worry about Brother's situation. He distributed Brother's photos to many matchmakers begging them to find a wife. In 2005, when Brother came home to look after Father, Father forced Brother to go on dates whenever the matchmaker recommended a girl. However, most girls thought our family was too poor and directly refused Brother, who, after several rejections, decided not to go on anymore.

Then one day, while we were having lunch, Aunt Ying stepped into our house and said, "Xi, I heard that you are looking for a wife for Cheng."

"Yes, Aunt Ying. I'm very worried about his marriage. You have many connections from doing business for years. I will reward you with expensive gifts if you find Cheng a wife," promised Father.

"Ha! I have come with good news. My former husband has a daughter who has been married for three years. But she is unhappy after giving birth to her second baby. I'm considering finding another husband for her. It occurred to me that our Cheng is the perfect choice," Aunt Ying explained.

"I heard you had divorced your husband last year. Why are you still involved in their business," Father asked?

"Although we are divorced, we are still relatives. That girl respects me and listens to my advice. Although she is a little fat and short, she is very good at farming work. I think she and Cheng would be a perfect match. If you allow me, I will take her Cheng's photo and persuade her to divorce her husband and marry Cheng. Since Cheng is so handsome, she will soon agree."

"Please let us have a discussion, and then I will give you an answer," replied father.

"There is no need for discussion, Father. I don't want to marry now. Aunt Ying, thank you for your good will, but please leave our house now," Brother said, losing his temper.

"Well, think twice," Aunt Ying cautioned as she left.

Brother felt ashamed. He never thought he would be in such a ridiculous situation. Soon after, with a great sense of failure he left for Qinghai where he continued to work as a market guard.

As Brother was very friendly and helpful, he was very popular. One of his older colleagues admired Brother a lot and introduced him to his niece, Gong, who was a tailor in the market. Although just twenty

years old, Gong had opened a shop to make clothing. Brother often helped her with work while she cooked various dishes and brought them to him. Gradually, they fell in love. In 2007, Brother proposed to Gong and she accepted. However, Gong's family was not satisfied with Brother's financial situation. They thought Brother was very poor and Gong would be unhappy after they married. With great confidence in Brother, Gong threatened that if her parents did not allow her to marry him, she would go work far away and never return. In the face of such determination, Gong's parents finally consented.

News of this impending marriage delighted Father and me. However, the groom's family had to pay for the wedding ceremony, the bride's clothes and ornaments, and a house for the couple. In addition, to thank the bride's parents for giving their precious daughter to the other family, the groom's family needed to give the bride's parents a cash payment of at least 10,000 *yuan*.

Such costs posed a great challenge. To raise money quickly, Father sold several goats and a calf at very low prices. Then he went to all our relatives to borrow money, but few were willing to lend anything in fear we would not return the money on time.

Father went to Uncle Two's family, and was refused. On his way home, he met Mei's father. Knowing Father was trying to borrow money, Mei's father played an evil trick. He told Father that he was ready to lend him 1,000 *yuan* but when Father came to his house to get the money three days later, he declared he had lent the money to others.

The date for Brother's marriage was approaching. Still needing more money, Father sold our only cow, which he had raised from a very small calf, to a butcher for slaughter.

Having sent Brother all the money he could get, Father was relieved and happy. Brother held his wedding in Qinghai. Unfortunately, Father and I were unable to be present. Nevertheless, and although herding as usual, on the day of Brother's wedding, Father had a sense of accomplishment. Seeing his child married meant he had fulfilled an important responsibility.

MISUNDERSTANDING AND HAPPINESS

In the autumn of 2006, I began grade eight in junior middle school. I entered a new class where I knew only a few of my new classmates. Peng had left and joined the army and Feng had gone to a city school. My life became lonely again.

At first Mr. Zhang, a PE teacher, was the head teacher of my new class. He was the husband of my former primary school teacher, Miss Su. He treated all the students fairly. However, just a month after classes started he was injured in a car accident so the school arranged a new head teacher for us - Mr. Shi. A young man in his twenties, Mr. Shi had been a senior middle school teacher, but was expelled because of his poor teaching skills. Even in junior middle school, Mr. Shi still seemed inexperienced. He taught math, but often failed to solve math problems. He hated being asked questions because he feared losing face, and the obvious preference he showed for the girls made the boys feel he was unfair. Our class was a mess.

Hui, my primary school classmate, was also in this new class. She was good at pleasing Mr. Shi and thus was promoted to class monitor to help him manage things.

At that time, every class had been assigned a blackboard on which students were expected to draw pictures or write something for decoration. When we needed to change what was on the blackboard, Hui asked me to draw some pictures, even if we were having class. Once, she asked me to leave our music class to draw pictures. When I arrived at the site, she was just playing with some girls. I cleaned the blackboard with water myself and drew two pictures after it was dry.

"Hui, I finished my job. Now I'm going back to class," I announced.

"Music class is not that important. Let's play here for a while and then go to the classroom together," Hui suggested.

"Sorry, I don't want to. I'm interested in music so I must leave now," and, with that, I left for the classroom.

A few minutes later, Mr. Shi came into the music room and said something to the music teacher who then told me to meet Mr. Shi outside.

"Chao, as the most excellent student, you should set a good example for the other students. Do you understand?" Mr. Shi angrily demanded.

"No, I do not understand," I said, quizzically.

"When Hui asked you to draw pictures on our blackboard, you should feel proud and take responsibility for it instead of sitting in the classroom while others are working outside," Mr. Shi said.

"I finished my job before I returned to the classroom," I replied in puzzlement.

"Then let's go check," Mr. Shi said and started walking to the blackboard.

When we arrived, I was shocked. All the pictures were gone.

"Where are my pictures? You erased the pictures I drew, didn't you?" I said accusingly to Hui.

"Yes. You drew those pictures before we decided on the content of the captions. We found that the pictures did not fit the captions. You should draw relevant pictures," declared Hui.

"Chao, listen to Hui. She is the class monitor. Although you are excellent at study, you must learn other skills from your classmates. Don't be too proud," Mr. Shi scolded.

"Well, I'm proud and I think that this is none of my business. I will never draw pictures for you again," I said and stormed angrily away.

Later, for the mid-term examination, I again topped the whole class, while Hui failed in both math and English. She then begged Mr. Shi to be assigned as my deskmate. In the beginning, she wanted me to help with her math and English but being very talkative, she often wanted to chat during class. This bothered me so I ignored her. She was then bored and wanted to change her seat again. But she was reluctant to ask Mr. Shi for another seat reassignment.

"Chao, do you know why I sit with you?" Hui asked.

"No, and I do not want to know," I said.

"It is Mr. Shi's idea. He said I am a poor student and should learn from you, so he arranged for me to sit here," explained Hui.

"Who knows?" I replied.

"I'm telling the truth. Please ask Mr. Shi to change your seat so you won't be bothered by me anymore. Ask him to change the seats with Dongyan. That way I can be her deskmate. You know we are very close friends," pleaded Hui.

"Sorry. I feel good sitting here. If you want to change seats again, please ask Mr. Shi yourself," I said dismissively.

"OK. I will ask him, but you must promise me that you will agree with whatever I ask you to do," insisted Hui.

"Do whatever you want," I said.

That afternoon, Hui asked me to meet Mr. Shi.

"Chao, you should treat your classmates in a friendly way rather than hurt their feelings," scolded Mr. Shi the second he caught sight of me.

"Whose feelings did I hurt?" I asked.

"He treated me very rudely after I became his deskmate and often denigrated me, calling me 'stupid,'" Hui said, and began weeping, adding emphasis to her lies. I must admit she was a born actress.

"Is that true?" Mr. Shi asked.

"I don't want to explain, but if I really have to, I hate having Hui as my deskmate. Please move her somewhere else," I said.

"How arrogant you are! I will change her to another seat, but remember you are nobody, even if your marks are excellent," Mr. Shi said angrily.

I was terribly misunderstood by my head teacher, but I did not want to explain anymore because I thought his attitude towards me had nothing to do with my situation.

One day when I was getting my bike after school, I found the front tire was flat. My house was five kilometers from school so it took me nearly three hours to walk home in the dark. The next day when I arrived at my classroom, I found some "bad" boys gawking and laughing at me.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked.

"How did you get home last night?" one asked, laughing even harder.

"Did you guys flatten my bike tire?" I shouted angrily.

"Yes. It is punishment for reporting to Mr. Shi that we went to the internet bar," the boy said.

"Who cares that you go to internet bars? How do you know I was the tattletale?" I replied.

"You're the most hardworking student in our class. It must be you. You are Mr. Shi's pet," another said.

"I don't hate you and I never want to be involved in your business. Please keep me away and don't bother me again. I am never anyone's pet!" I shouted so loudly that they ran off.

I was depressed that so many people misunderstood me. I continued to feel isolated from others so gave all my attention to my studies.

One day, Chang became my deskmate. She was lively and humorous but poor in math so she often asked me about math problems. While I was explaining how to solve these problems, she periodically cracked jokes. I felt very happy to be with her. She was a light in my miserable life, bringing me a little happiness.

Chang was very beautiful. She had long straight hair, played the guitar well, and dreamed of becoming a pop singer in the future. Our music teacher was very fond of her and often asked her to sing in front of the class. Once, when asked to sing a pop song, Chang chose a song named *Tomorrow I Will Marry You* and asked me to sing with her. I was too shy to sing such a song with a girl, so I refused. Our music teacher then forced me to sing along with Chang. Later, gossip circulated that Chang loved me. Learning this, I started to keep away from her because puppy love was forbidden. As the best student in the whole grade, I did not want to be involved in romantic love. However, Chang did not care what others thought and she treated me naturally and continued playing jokes as usual. I could not control myself because Chang's attraction was too strong.

Chang and I often enjoyed all sorts of music or drew ridiculous pictures together. Time passed slowly. I thought we would stay with each other forever. I don't know if it was love between us, but I miss the feeling I had with her.

DORM ROOM TROUBLES

In September 2007, I became a grade nine student, which meant that I would take the senior middle school examination the following summer. I knew it was critical that I excel in the examination. If I did not, I feared that I would lose my dream of becoming a college student and instead would be like other teenagers in my village who became migrant workers in the big cities. I wanted more time to study so, after discussing options with Father, I rented a room near our school. This meant I wouldn't have to cycle to and from school every day. However, because we were poor I had to share a room with two other boys. Unfortunately, my roommates, Pan and Yang, were the two students from my village who did not want to go to school in my company because I looked impoverished. Yang, Mei's cousin, often treated me very arrogantly.

Our house-lady, an old woman in her seventies, was very kind and liked young people. Knowing I had lost my mother when I was very young, she showed great sympathy and often cooked delicious food for me. I respected her and often helped her with various chores.

In the beginning, life went smoothly but later my two roommates became unfriendly. For example, I would stay in the classroom studying until ten at night, while they often went to bed at nine. This meant that inevitably I disturbed them when I returned to the room. I felt very sorry about that, but I could not change my schedule. I promised to make as little noise as possible. However, they still complained.

"Chao, can you come back to the dorm earlier? You always bother me when I am sleeping," Yang said.

"I'm so sorry about that. I'll make as little noise as possible," I promised.

"It doesn't work. I'm always awakened by the sound of you opening the door," Pan complained.

"Well, I am very sorry. How can I avoid disturbing you?" I asked.

"Please come back at nine. You should change your schedule to fit ours," Yang said.

"OK, I will try," I promised.

...

I did change my study schedule and was able to return to the dorm before nine. However, when I needed to use my desk light to review my studies, Yang complained that he could not fall asleep with so much light. So I turned off the light and waited for them to fall asleep. Once they were sleeping soundly, I turned on my lamp again. This seemed to solve the problems.

Now I had more money, but only three *yuan* a day to buy food, which was just enough to buy a big bowl of noodles. I brought a week's supply of buns from home for breakfast and dinner. Noticing this, my house-lady allowed me to cook in her kitchen. She told me that she had a grandson who was my age. He lived with his parents in Phoenix County. However, even though she missed her grandson, they seldom visited her which left her lonely. I was lucky that she treated me just like her grandson. This "special" attention made my roommates jealous.

"Chao, why do you often go to the old lady's kitchen?" Yang asked.

"Cooking for myself," I answered.

"It's unfair! We all pay the same rent so why can only you enter her kitchen and eat with her?" Yang complained.

"I think she will let you do the same if you want," I said.

"Well, I don't, actually. I don't need to cook at all," Yang declared arrogantly.

"Then why are you jealous?"

"I'm not jealous. I just feel uncomfortable about it. A student cooking for himself looks so odd," he said.

"I don't agree. Your mother cooks for you, but I lost my mother when I was little, so I often cook for myself," I explained.

"Why don't you buy food to eat? It isn't proper for you to cook in your house-lady's kitchen," Yang said, laughing.

I kept quiet for a long time. I was very sad and I didn't know what to do. The next day, I took my buns to my dorm room and no longer went to the house-lady's kitchen. The old lady felt it was strange, and asked me to eat with her several times, but I declined gently. I was unsure if my behavior was polite. I was very sensitive and I did not want

to be regarded as odd by others even though I knew Yang's attitude was totally wrong.

"What's that bad smell?" asked Pan one night.

"Chao's buns. He brought them to our dorm today," Yang answered.

"Why do you do that, Chao? They smell strange," commented Pan.

Saying nothing, I got up, collected the buns, walked outside, and threw them onto the garbage heap in front of the house, trying hard to control my tears.

The next day, I went to see Uncle Tang, Father's cousin and Dan's father. He worked in the junior middle school as the vice headmaster.

"Uncle Tang, may I ask you something?"

"Go ahead. You are an excellent student and I'm very proud of you," replied Uncle Tang.

"I'm hoping to move to the school dorm so that I can live in the school to study," I answered.

"Well, you are hardworking. I know our village is far from the school. It is very inconvenient to go to school by bike. However, you know we only have a student dorm for girls in this school," he said.

"I see. Thank you anyway," I said.

"Don't worry. I'll talk with the headmaster. We have some empty rooms for teachers. Since you are the top student in your grade and you really need a room, I think the headmaster might allow you to stay in one of those rooms," Uncle Tang promised.

...

Three days later, my new head teacher for grade nine, Mr. Miao entered our classroom and announced to all the classmates that I had been assigned to live at school.

"Chao is the top student in our grade. His home is far from school. To provide him with a better study environment, I discussed his situation with our headmaster and persuaded him to allow Chao to stay in an empty room in the teacher's building for free. Everyone should learn from Chao. If you are excellent, you can get all you want. Chao, you should study harder to thank the school for its concern. If you get good grades and enter Hope Senior Middle School, the top senior middle

school in Caihong City, we will all feel very proud of you," Mr. Miao said emotionally.

The students were cheering, as if I had won a prize. It was certainly special treatment for a student, because the teachers' rooms were in much better condition than the girls' dorm. There, eight girls were crowded into one small, cold, dark, room.

But I was still confused. I had asked Uncle Tang to help find me a room. How did it happen that my head teacher could persuade the headmaster? Deciding not to worry about it, I happily moved to my new room. I was tired of living with those boys who constantly looked for ways to humiliate me.

Once settled in my new room, I implemented my study plan with enthusiasm. I studied in the classroom until ten, then returned to my dorm room to sleep alone without fear of complaints. Although my three *yuan* was not enough to satisfy my hunger, I was pleased with my new situation and appreciated Uncle Tang a lot. Then, after about three weeks, without any notice Kai moved into my dorm room.

I was puzzled because my head teacher said the dorm belonged only to me. When I caught up with Uncle Tang, he explained that Kai was his distant relative whose home was also very far from school, so he had let him move into my dorm.

"But my head teacher said the headmaster gave me the free dorm as a prize for my hard work," I protested.

"That's not true. We don't have a student dorm for boys so we chose a room in the teachers' building as a dorm for boys. We do not charge you rent. That's your privilege. But any boy who lives far from school has the right to stay there," explained Uncle Tang.

"I see," I said in puzzlement, not knowing if I should believe Uncle Tang or my head teacher.

After Kai moved in, my space became smaller but I now had a good friend. Kai was hardworking so we both studied and went to class together. I felt very comfortable with him. He also respected me and did not complain about my behavior. One day when we were doing homework together, it occurred to me that maybe Kai also did not need to pay rent because no one came to collect any money.

"Kai, do you pay room rent?" I asked.

"No. Mr. Tang said this room was free because it was only for hardworking students. Didn't you know that? Why do you ask?" Kai said.

"Just out of curiosity. Nothing special," I said.

A month later, Yang asked to have a quiet talk with me during the class break. "Chao, I will move to your room in the teacher's building soon. Please give me a key to your door," Yang said.

"How ridiculous! Who told you that you could move in?" I exclaimed.

"My uncle told me that Mr. Tang had given permission," Yang said.

"Uncle Tang said you could move into my dorm? I don't believe you," I said very doubtfully.

"It's true," Yang said.

"Why are you moving out of the room with Pan?" I asked.

"The old woman told us to leave because we smoked at night and caused a small fire. My uncle said he could get a free room from Mr. Tang for me so he asked me to get the key from you," Yang answered.

"I don't agree with this. My dorm is too small for three students to share." I answered.

"We will see," Yang said.

That afternoon, while I was doing homework in my classroom, Yang came in and again asked for my dorm key. I refused. He replied that his uncle and Uncle Tang were waiting for me in front of my dorm. So I went with Yang to the dorm.

"Chao, please open the door and let Mei's father put Yang's belongings inside," Uncle Tang ordered.

"I do not want to live with him. Our habits are totally different," I answered.

"This room is public, not just for you," Mei's father shouted.

"This dorm is a prize from the headmaster because I'm the top student in the whole grade," I replied.

"Chao, I told you that anyone could live here," Uncle Tang said, and again ordered me to open the door.

"If Yang moves in, I will move out," I declared.

"Great! Do it now!" Mei's father said and tried to grab the key from my hand, but was stopped by Uncle Tang.

"The headmaster let Chao live in this dorm for free. You should get permission from him before you move in," cautioned Uncle Tang knowing that if I moved out, the headmaster would not permit students to live there.

"OK. Let's leave." Seeing that I was unwilling to give him the key, Mei's father left with Uncle Tang and Yang.

I was happy I had protected my room successfully, although I knew Uncle Tang was furious with me. Soon I learned that the trouble this room had caused was not over.

After the first exam in grade nine, I lost my position as the top student and instead ranked number two. Although others saw this as a small change, I was deeply upset. Our head teacher scolded, "Pride makes one fail. You are too proud of yourself, Chao. You think that because you live in a free schoolroom you are superior to others. You are nothing if you lose your position as a top student."

I had never felt arrogant or superior to others. However, since I had failed to retain my position as the top student, I accepted the criticism and ascribed all the faults to myself. In the following two months, Mr. Miao continued criticizing. When I entered the classroom in the morning, he criticized me for being too lazy to come to the classroom early to study, never realizing I had to cook breakfast for myself. Noticing I was not in classroom at night, he criticized me for not studying at night, not understanding I was studying in my dorm room to avoid the noise in the classroom.

One day, I failed to get a full score on a math test. Mr. Miao looked at my paper declaring, "You are so stupid. Only primary school students would make such a mistake. You are living in the free room the school provides you, but just look at your mark! What kind of gratitude is this?"

"Mr. Miao, I think Chao did well on this test. He got the highest mark in the whole class," Chang pointed out, trying to help.

"But he made so many stupid mistakes. Chao, if you continue like this, you will never enter Hope Senior Middle School. You said you were too poor to afford room rent, but look at your bad behavior on tests. You really humiliate your father," continued Mr. Miao.

Finally, angered by the mention of Father, I stood up and replied, "Mr. Miao, it's none of your business whether I enter Hope Senior Middle School or not. I will leave that room immediately. Please do not mention Father when scolding me again," I sobbed and rushed out the classroom.

I moved back to my former room, which was now empty as Yang and Pan had left. The house-lady was very happy to see me return. I cried a long time in front of her. I have never felt so helpless. She

comforted me with warm words and cooked for me. From then on, I lived in the old lady's house alone until I graduated from junior middle school. She often helped me with my laundry and prepared food for me. When I tried to give her money, she refused. She said I had paid for her care through the happiness I brought her. I appreciated her a lot because she comforted me when I suffered. Even today, I visit her whenever I go home. I'm so glad she is still healthy and still helping young people like me.

When thinking about the troubles related to that dorm room, I feel sad. However, I don't blame anyone because human nature is complicated. What is important is that I am kind and fair.

PUPPY LOVE

When I joined class four in grade nine, I didn't know most of my classmates. Chang was originally assigned to class one. Although she applied to join class four, Mr. Miao had refused because her grades were low. A teachers' salary depended on their students' marks. The higher the marks, the higher their salaries. Mr. Miao did not want Chang to reduce his salary. However, once he learned Chang's father was an officer in the town government, he immediately accepted her. In this way, Chang found herself in my class again.

Mr. Miao arranged for Ning, his relatives' daughter, to be my deskmate. She had taken the senior middle school entrance examination the previous year but had not passed. Mr. Miao asked me to help her with her study. However, Ning did not like to study at all. Instead, during class she enjoyed listening to music and watching videos on her cellphone. Sometimes she went to Phoenix County Town to surf the internet in internet bars for the whole night. When with me, Ning liked to talk about her boyfriend, rather than anything related to study. Although I was tired of sitting by her, she enjoyed being my deskmate. She often showed off in front of others by saying that her deskmate was the top student in the whole grade implying she had a good relationship with me.

Seeing me near Ning angered Chang. When I approached her to talk, Chang just kept silent or turned her back. At first I was confused and saddened by her behavior. I missed the time we had shared the previous year.

"What's wrong with you recently?" I asked Chang one time.

"I'm extremely fine. I don't need your care. Go enjoy yourself with your new deskmate," Chang retorted dismissively.

"Why do you say such things? Aren't we good friends?" I asked, still confused.

"We used to be but not anymore. I hate you," she said hurtfully.

"Why? What did I do wrong?" I persisted.

"You did nothing wrong? Ha!" Chang complained.

I was perplexed. I cared about her but had no idea how to restore our relationship. One day, in a self-study class, I told Ning about my confusion and asked her for advice.

"How stupid you are! Chang is in love with you," Ning announced excitedly.

I blushed with embarrassment.

"Chang is jealous about how often you are with me. Spend time with her," Ning said.

"But my seat is here and I need to study all the time. Where should I go if I don't stay here?" I asked.

"You are really an idiot. Let me help you. I'll have a talk with Chang," Ning said happily, as if she were an experienced matchmaker.

...

The next evening, Chang came to me while I was doing homework and asked for help with a math problem.



"Did you understand?" I asked after we did the calculations twice.

"No. Please show me again," Chang said and smiled.

"OK! It's easy. Please pay attention," and I repeated my calculation again, then asked "Now?"

"Not at all but thank you. By the way, Ning explained everything to me and I forgive you," Chang said and left.

"Forgive me for what?" I thought. Later, when Ning came back I described my latest confusion.

"Well, I explained it all to Chang. I told her that you cared about her and loved her. I also told her that although you are a good boy, I didn't love you at all because I have a boyfriend who is a policeman. Now Chang and I are good friends," Ning said happily.

"What! No! I'm not in love with Chang. We're just friends," I explained.

"OK, then you are just friends, but I'm afraid Chang doesn't agree," Ning giggled.

Chang and I soon became as close as we had been. She often stayed in the classroom late after school to study with me. The odd thing was while I was the top student in our class she ranked last. I wanted to teach her all the subjects she did badly in. I hoped that we could enter senior middle school together. She began to work very hard which surprised people who knew her well. Meanwhile, the gossip that we were dating spread among our classmates.

When I lived in the dorm room which Mr. Miao claimed to have arranged for me with the headmaster, Chang often brought me some food or snacks, which moved me deeply. However, I was very sensitive and didn't like others to show their sympathy. When anyone sent me a gift or anything out of sympathy for my poverty, I refused it. I hated the feeling that anyone was sorry for me. One night, after studying together, Chang handed me an electric blanket from her bag.

"You can use electricity in the school dorm, so I brought you this in case you feel cold in winter," Chang said.

"Thanks for your concern but I don't think I need it," I replied.

"Please accept it just in case you need it. I know your life isn't easy," Chang insisted.

"I don't need others' sympathy," I said, overly sensitive as usual.

"This is not sympathy. I'm just worried that you will feel cold," Chang sniffled, clearly on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry. I will keep it. Thank you so much," I agreed.

...

I lacked self-confidence because of my family's poverty. I often doubted even Chang's affection. While I hoped that she would always treat me

kindly because she loved me, I could not truly believe that such a beautiful girl, particularly one pursued by many boys, would fall in love with me. I thought perhaps she treated me as her best friend while also feeling sympathy for my situation.

One day, during a PE class, when other boys were playing basketball, I was sitting on the grass, depressed. That was around the time I had failed to top the class and Mr. Miao had cruelly scolded me. I worried about what I should do if I failed to pass the senior middle school entrance examination. Yong, Sister Yan, and Juan had all failed the exam. I knew that although my family was poor, I could still create a decent life with my own hard work.

While deep in thought, Chang approached and asked, "Chao, why are you sitting alone?"

"No special reason. I was just resting," I murmured.

"What about running a race with me?" Chang suggested.

"You against me? Are you kidding? The result is obvious. I will most certainly win," I declared and laughed.

"Who knows? If you could let me have a fifty-meter head start, I'm sure I'll win," Chang said so I agreed.

Our race was 400 meters - one circuit of our sports ground. I let her run fifty meters ahead and then I tried my best to pass her. Everyone cheered up when they saw we were racing. Eventually, just before the finish mark I passed her.

"Were you pursuing me just now?" Chang asked.

"Of course," I said.

"Then you won me and my heart," Chang said with a flushed face.

I was shocked by these words, whose connotations I totally understood. I was excited at first but then I calmed down. Puppy love was forbidden at school and I knew that I shouldn't get involved before the very important exam. Teachers often told us that once students started puppy love, they paid less attention to study. Already, just a few weeks earlier I had failed to be the best student and Mr. Miao's attitude to me had changed dramatically. I resolved to devote all my energy to my study.

"I dare not accept your heart. It is too heavy for me to carry," I answered.

"I don't understand. Do you love me?" Chang asked.

"Yes...but... I mean no," I stuttered and fled, leaving her wiping her tears alone in the wind.

That night, Chang did not study in the classroom anymore. I knew I had made her sad. I also felt terrible because I dared not admit my affection for her. Though I loved her, my sense of inferiority as well as my need to study prevented me from declaring it. The next day, Chang stopped speaking to me. I did not apologize, because I thought it was better if we kept apart.

At the beginning of the new term after the winter vacation, a boy named Jun joined our class. He was assigned as Chang's deskmate. He was very outgoing and friendly and after several weeks, he was getting along very well with everyone in our class, especially Chang. They sat in the last row of the classroom and teachers paid them little attention. They often played cards or watched videos during class. Sometimes we heard their giggling. Jun began to accompany Chang back home after classes. As their relationship became closer and closer, I became increasingly jealous.

When two students fell in love and declared their relationship to others, they bought candies and handed them out to other students to get their blessing. One afternoon, when I stepped into the classroom, I heard many students laughing loudly. Despite being a little curious, I ignored them as usual and sat in my seat. Jun came and gave me some candies.

"Chang and I are dating. Please bless us," Jun said with a big smile.

"Oh really? Congratulations," I murmured.

"Thank you," Jun said and, putting some candies on my desk, left.

I threw the candies into the dustbin and started to study, but I could not focus at all. I dared not look at Chang. I knew I had lost something special and felt sad and regretful. During the class break that afternoon, while I was standing alone in front of the classroom Chang approached me and asked, "Do those candies taste sweet?"

I turned to her slowly and said, "I do not know."

"Why?"

"Because I did not taste them."

"Then why don't you taste them?"

"No reason why. Congratulations," I said and returned to the classroom.

Now I lost all hope of improving my relationship with Chang. We were just like two strangers and no longer spoke to each other. Then, two months before our graduation, before we took the final exam, the school arranged for us to have a physical exam at the local hospital. Three days later, Mr. Miao sent me to pick up the health reports from the hospital. While collecting the reports from a nurse, she said, "One student needs to have another test. We think she may have hepatitis B. Tell her to come here next Monday."

It was Chang. I was so sorry and did not know how to tell her. I knew I had to keep it a secret or the students would gossip. After returning to school I did not hand out the reports immediately. I told Chang to wait for me on the playground after school.

"What's up?" Chang said.

I led her to a quiet corner of the sports field and told her calmly about the health check.

"No, I can't believe it," she said and started crying.

I hugged her tightly. A few students on the playground yelled and cheered loudly. I hugged her even tighter because I knew she needed my support. We stayed there for a long time.

Several days later, Chang came to tell me that the doctors had made a mistake. The subsequent check had proved that she was healthy. I was relieved and happy for her, "What good news. I'm very happy for you!"

"Thank you for all you did for me," Chang said with a lovely smile.

"Well, I need to apologize to you," I said

"For what?" Chang asked.

"I hugged you that day. I hope Jun did not misunderstand us," I said with embarrassment.

"Ha! Forget it. Jun and I are just friends. We tried to trick you to make you feel jealous," Chang giggled.

"What? Really! I was never jealous at all," I lied.

...

The last time I saw Chang was when we took graduation photos. All the students gathered in front of our teaching building except for Chang. As we stood in line, I left a space for her beside me.

"Is everyone here?" asked Mr. Miao.

"No, Chang hasn't come!" I shouted.

"We will wait another two minutes," Mr. Miao said.

"May I stand here?" Ning asked.

"No. It's for somebody else," I said.

"I see," said Ning, adding, "But where is she?"

"I'm here!" Chang shouted and ran toward me wearing a beautiful long dress.

...

After the graduation photo, Chang quit school. Although she never said goodbye to me, she left me with many beautiful memories. Later, I heard from others that she had gone to Beijing to study music.

A FATEFUL EXAMINATION

Brother had not taken the senior middle school entrance examination because of the family's poverty. Father was therefore determined that I would graduate from senior middle school. I studied extremely hard and dreamed I would enter Hope Senior Middle School, the best senior middle school in Caihong City, which encompasses ten counties that includes my home in Phoenix County. Only the top ten students in the whole county had a chance to enter. Once a student at Hope Senior Middle School, I would have the great possibility of entering a famous university in China. I would then be able to change my family's poor situation. If I was good enough to get into Hope Senior Middle School everyone in my county would be proud of me.

These thoughts inspired me to study very hard from the beginning of grade nine in junior middle school. Despite some challenges, I carried out my study plan. However, as the lessons became more challenging I was finding it increasingly difficult to understand the subject matter. We studied Chinese, math, English, politics, world and Chinese history, physics, and chemistry. For each subject, we needed to memorize and understand many points in a very short time. I felt that the chemistry taught in grade nine was too abstract to understand.

Two months after starting grade nine, I ranked second in the whole grade. I wasn't too bothered but our head teacher's attitude towards me changed dramatically. Mr. Miao scolded me for not being the top student, and pointed out my various shortcomings. His criticisms were unfair, but I did not quarrel with him. Mr. Miao even asked to meet Father who, at that time, was in bad health, and in any case, my home was very far from the school. I begged Mr. Miao not to ask Father to come to school but he insisted. Thus, one evening, after a day's work, Father rode an old bike for nearly an hour to school to meet Mr. Miao, who then complained that I had made no progress in study and scolded Father for not providing me better study support. I was

extremely sad when Father left Mr. Miao's office. After seeing him off, I resolved to get the top position to honor him.

Mr. Miao continued to use the dorm issue to torture me, repeating that I was an ungrateful person as I had not rewarded the school with good marks. I suffered a lot from this unnecessary pressure. One night, when I was alone in my dorm, the headmaster knocked on my door. His room was adjacent to mine, but he seldom lived there.

After I welcomed him into my room, he asked, "Chao, are you satisfied with this room?"

"It is very good. I am so grateful that you have kindly allowed me to live here for free," I said.

"You are the top student in our school now. All the leaders and teachers have great hope for your future. You deserve it," he said.

"Thank you, but since the last exam I'm not the top student anymore. I'm so sorry," I said.

"Don't lose heart. You've kept the first position successfully for two years. I believe you'll do better in the future. Tell me your worst subject on the exam?" the headmaster asked.

"Math. I always did well in math in the past, but since starting grade nine, it has been hard for me to apply what I've learned to specific exercises," I answered.

"Who is your math teacher?" the headmaster asked.

"Mr. Miao," I said.

"Mr. Miao is very experienced in teaching. Listen to him carefully," the headmaster advised. "Do you have advice for Mr. Miao so you could do better in math?"

"If he could explain specific problems rather than focus on theory, I would learn better," I answered.

"OK. I'll tell Mr. Miao. It has been ten years since a student from our school has been able to enter Hope Senior Middle School. Only about ten students from our county enter it successfully each year. I hope you succeed. It would bring our school glory."

"Thank you, I will try my best," I said, moved by the headmaster's kindness.

...

The next afternoon, when it was the time for our math class, Mr. Miao angrily entered the classroom. He did not open the textbook but began berating me.

"Chao, stand up!" he commanded

I stood up at once.

"Who do you think you are? You think you are a better teacher than me? How dare you speak ill of me in front of the headmaster. I never thought you were so selfish and stupid. If you have any advice, please tell me directly. If you think I'm not qualified, please go find the headmaster and ask him to teach you. Look at your math paper from the last test. How many stupid mistakes did you make? I'm really fed up with you..." Mr. Miao went on shouting.

I silently stood as he scolded me.

There was no teaching that day. I never learned what the headmaster said, but I didn't explain or apologize to Mr. Miao.

After the next examination in mid-December I regained my position as top of the whole grade. But I was not happy because my math score was still poorer than my other subjects. I knew that was mostly because I hated Mr. Miao. From the first time he had scolded me, I had refused to follow his teaching. Instead, I had tried to study the textbook by myself, but I couldn't understand it on my own. I needed someone to explain some points, but I was too stubborn to ask Mr. Miao for help.

At the beginning of the next term, which was the last term of my junior middle school, I found Uncle Tang in his office. "I want to move to another class this semester. I don't want to be in Mr. Miao's class any longer," I said.

"Students may not change classes in the second semester," he replied, not asking why I wanted to change.

Reluctantly I continued in Mr. Miao's class until I graduated. Although Mr. Miao scolded me sometimes, I just turned a deaf ear and focused on study.

One afternoon, after we had had our graduation photos taken, about three weeks before the senior middle exam, I felt my desk shaking violently during math class.

"Ning! Stop shaking the desk!" I said to my deskmate.

"I am not!" Ning shouted.

"Earthquake!" I screamed.

The whole class became chaotic as everyone tried to crowd through the narrow classroom door.

When we got to the playground safely, we found that Mr. Miao had been the first to arrive. He had rushed out of the classroom immediately when the earthquake started, ignoring student safety. Later, students nicknamed him "Running Man."

The year was 2008. Although the earthquake epicenter was in Sichuan, we also felt it. To ensure our safety, the school was closed. However, we still had to prepare for the upcoming examination.

After returning home, I strictly followed my study plan. I knew that to relax would be a fatal mistake.

The day before the senior middle school entrance examination, I went to Uncle Tang's home in Phoenix County Town where the testing site was. If I stayed at home, I would not be able to get to the examination on time.

I once thought that Uncle Tang's family was the happiest I had ever seen, and I greatly envied Uncle Tang's only daughter, Dan, for having such a happy family. However, my feeling changed after I spent a night in their home.

Dan, who was three years older than me, was my childhood playmate. Her family had moved to Phoenix County Town when she was in junior middle school. I rarely saw her after that. When I was about to take the exam, she was in senior middle school. Although we had not seen each other for a long time, Dan was very friendly. After dinner, she and I went out for a walk. She told me she wanted to go to a university far away to study, but never told me the reasons. When we returned, I was shocked to find Uncle Tang and his wife quarreling loudly. Uncle Tang was trying to hit his wife with a metal rod, while she dodged and screamed. I grabbed Uncle Tang and tried to take the rod away from him. Once they saw me, they calmed down.

Dan was indifferent, having obviously become used to these altercations.

Uncle Tang apologized and told me to go to bed in their guest room. At about midnight, Dan's parents started quarreling again. The next morning, I drank two cups of coffee before going to the test site.

Half a month later, the final results were announced. While I was indeed the top student from my school, I still needed another ten points to get into Hope Senior Middle School. My math grade was low. When looking at my grade report, Uncle Tang agreed, "Your math score is low. If only you could have had another math teacher."

Eventually he recommended me to Phoenix Senior Middle School, the best one in Phoenix County. Because of my excellent exam marks I did not have to pay fees for two years. Uncle Tang also got some money from the school for recommending an excellent student.

I was satisfied. I would have free education for two years, which would lessen Father's burden.

MY FIRST QINGHAI VISIT

Mother was originally from Qinghai. She had often told me about Qinghai, a place she said where there was no poverty at all and everyone led a happy life; it seemed like a paradise. So of course, I was eager to visit this special place.

When I was sixteen and had sat for the senior entrance examination, Father thought I was now old enough to go to Qinghai on my own, to visit my maternal grandmother, Grandma Wei. So in the summer of 2008, I started off by train. In my imagination, Grandmother was a very kind old lady. When I was in primary school, every winter, Grandma Wei posted clothes and candies, which warmed my heart. I was excited at the prospect of meeting her.

The train left late at night so first I went to Caihong City to visit Uncle and Aunt Big in the apartment they had bought after their retirement to live in. This was only the second time I had seen them since I was five, when Uncle Big had almost adopted me. I arrived at their home at lunch time. Knowing I was coming, Aunt Big had prepared some special dishes for lunch. They lived a simple, thrifty life. After lunch, I spent the afternoon in their apartment, which made me uncomfortable because I needed to behave very politely. While Uncle Big read a newspaper, Aunt Big talked about her past; I realized she was both kind and lonely.

Born into a warlord's family, Aunt Big was spoiled by her family. Her father was a general before the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). He was powerful and had two wives, who were sisters, the elder of whom was Aunt Big's mother. Aunt Big had been sent to Xi'an, the capital city of her province, for education. She did very well in art and so well in gymnastics that she was even chosen as the representative to join the national sports meeting. However, life's fortunes changed dramatically after the founding of the PRC. Her father was sentenced to death and the family's wealth was confiscated by the

new government. She and her whole family then moved to Phoenix County Town to live. At that time, family background was very important. Very poor families were considered to have a good background, the right background. Conversely, rich families were seen as having enslaved the poor, so to have been rich was bad. Obviously, Aunt Big's background was extremely bad, and the family suffered greatly. Consequently, few young men were willing to marry Aunt Big. Uncle Big also couldn't find a wife because he was also from a landlord family. Thanks to a matchmaker, Aunt Big and Uncle Big were introduced to each other and married while Uncle Big was a college student. After marriage, Aunt Big stayed in our village to farm just like a common village woman. As there were no teachers in the village school, Aunt Big was assigned to teach in the village primary school.

During the Cultural Revolution, Aunt Big was severely criticized and denounced by her students. Her brother was treated so badly he committed suicide and her two mothers were sent to clean the streets.

Finally, having graduated from college, Uncle Big was sent to be a veterinarian in Qinghai where Aunt Big joined him with their two children. She became a teacher in a local primary school where she spent the next thirty years.

I was again touched by Aunt Big's experiences. Suffering when she was young had made her a strong, independent woman. I used to think Aunt Big was selfish and cold, however, I realized I was wrong. She was actually a great woman who had suffered a lot but never blamed others.

I told her about my conflict with Mr. Miao.

"You misunderstand your head teacher," Aunt Big said.

"But he kept treating me coldly and was very cruel to me," I said.

"He just wanted you to get good grades and improve your study. Though he treated you unfairly, you should forgive him because only if you forgive others can you get peace and freedom in your own heart," counseled Aunt Big.

I had been very angry about how Mr. Miao had treated me during all of grade nine. But I learned something from Aunt Big. Later, every time I got angry or felt upset, I tried to forgive others and then I could feel happy again.

At midnight, Uncle Big himself took me to the train station. It was my first train trip. After sitting for more than ten hours, I arrived in Qinghai the next morning. Brother was waiting for me. We had not met

since he had married a year earlier. He looked short and thin, unlike the strong guy I remembered when I was a little child. Maybe it was because I had grown up. Brother took me directly to Grandma Wei's home.

Grandma Wei was very different from what I had imagined. She was very short and extremely thin. Without a hug or kiss, she just stood in front of me and smiled.

I was left to care for Grandma Wei. She was in bad health and her temper was also not good. She treated me badly and often quarreled with me about cooking. Although I tried hard to be polite, she still lost her temper easily.

Immediately I felt lonely and helpless because I did not have Grandma Wei's care. Instead, Grandma Wei treated me just like her servant, which upset and saddened me. I had no one to tell my feelings to, so I just wrote them in my diary. One afternoon, when I was cleaning, I found Grandma Wei reading my diary in my bedroom. I was embarrassed because I had mentioned her in my diary. However, without scolding me, she called me over and showed me her family photo album while telling me about her family.

Grandma Wei was born in 1935 when the political situation was a mess. Her father was a great landlord and had sent his only daughter to school in Tianjin at an early age, unlike other traditional Chinese parents whose daughters were never educated. At the age of eighteen, Grandma Wei worked as a nurse in the local hospital. During this time her mother arranged for her to marry her cousin - my grandfather, Grandpa Wei, whose father was a warlord in a very powerful family. Thus, after marriage, Grandma Wei was forbidden to work again because it was shameful in the minds of the older generation to allow a daughter-in-law to work outside the home.

In 1949, several years after my grandparents married, Qinghai was liberated by the People's Liberation Army. Grandpa Wei's whole family was soon driven to a pastoral area to live. As they were accustomed to life in a big city, they suffered a lot from the bad weather and poor living conditions. Grandpa Wei had never done manual labor so all of life's burdens fell on Grandma Wei's shoulders. Grandpa Wei was irresponsible, spending his time gambling and reading novels. Grandma Wei became responsible for the whole family. She managed to keep everyone alive and support her only son, Uncle Yuan, to enter college.

She said she was tired of caring for others because no one seemed grateful and seldom cared about her.

Though her feelings were complex and hard to verbalize, I understood Grandma Wei's sadness. She had created all sorts of advantages for Uncle Yuan, but he moved far away after he married. She brought up Brother, but Brother was now busy making money rather than spending time looking after her. Knowing her sadness, I felt very sorry for her and started to treat her with great respect and kindness. Our relationship improved. After two weeks with Grandma Wei, I returned home.

The day I was leaving, Grandmother's eyes were full of tears. I wiped the tears from her face and promised to see her again soon.

20

SENIOR ONE YEAR

In 2008, I entered Phoenix Senior Middle School. On the first day of the new semester, Father insisted that he accompany me to school. I thought it unnecessary and refused. However, he was very worried that I was too young to deal with the financial affairs in school so finally, I allowed him to come along. Wearing his usual worn and ragged clothing, Father looked very old as he rode an old bike borrowed from a neighbor. I did not want my classmates to know I was from a very poor family. I was afraid that, as had happened before, others might judge my family from Father's appearance. Father did not understand my feelings at all. He led me around to all the classrooms in the teaching building to find my classroom. When we reached it, he rushed forward to ask the teacher questions without waiting in line, which made the other parents glare at him angrily. I felt humiliated by Father's awkward behavior, but could do nothing.

"You are old enough to register by yourself. Please do not let your grandfather accompany you again," my head teacher, a handsome man in his thirties, said to me.

"OK, thanks," I said.

"He's not my grandson, he's my younger son and the top student in your class," announced Father loudly, a proud look on his face.

...

On the way back home, I complained to Father about his behavior in front of others. He didn't listen and said he was just telling the truth. I resolved then never to let him go to my school again.

I was assigned to a dorm with three other boys. In the beginning, we got along very well. But later I found I was quite different from them. I lived in the school dorm the whole week and went back home only on weekends. I needed to buy my meals with cash. I now had twenty-five *yuan* a week, which meant I could spend only five *yuan* a day. One day after lunch, while I was walking with my three roommates, they invited me to the store for snacks. As they all bought something, I bought a

small bag of cookies for three *yuan*. As a result, I did not have dinner that day, and decided I would eat alone in the future.

Once, when I was eating some food I had brought from home, one of my roommates laughed at me for being so poor. Afterwards, I ignored him.

Knowing I would not earn respect for my material possessions, I was determined to earn their respect for my studies. As I had been the top student in my junior middle school, I thought I could easily get the top position in the senior middle school. The reality was different. On the first exam, I ranked thirty-three out of 1,000 students in my grade. Some thought I did well, but I could not forgive myself for feeling so self-important and too confident. In the next half semester, I worked extremely hard. I gave up all my playtime and instead sat in front of my desk from morning to midnight, deep in study. That was a very hard time, but it delivered good results. I was awarded the top student scholarship of 500 *yuan* and ranked eighth in the exam at the end of our first term.

While devoting myself to my study, I did not notice Father's bad situation at home. Since recovering from a sudden disease in 2005, Father's health had deteriorated, but he still insisted on herding our three goats and one cow. He needed to clean the cattle enclosure and cut grass for the cow, both hard jobs. At the same time, he continued to farm. Father suffered from a stomach illness but as he had no money, he did not consult a doctor and instead tolerated the pain hoping it would disappear. However, it worsened. Sometimes it kept him awake at night. In the end, he went to the hospital. When the doctors suggested he have an endoscopy, he refused on the grounds it would cost too much - several hundred *yuan*. He asked the doctor to just give him some medicine to relieve the pain.

Having won the 500-yuan scholarship, a great amount of money for my family, I tried hard to persuade Father to have the stomach test. He finally agreed. I accompanied him to the hospital where, after hesitating, he entered. While the test was being conducted, I sat outside, hoping that the doctor would learn why Father felt pain in his stomach and then cure him. Afterwards, I followed the doctor to her office.

"Is Father's disease serious?" I asked.

"It's hard to say. We need more time to study the sample from his stomach," the doctor said in a serious tone.

"How soon can we know the result?" I asked.

"In three days. The situation is complicated. Don't tell your father about that in case he worries. Just come back here three days later," the doctor said.

I left the doctor's office feeling worried and found Father waiting for me in front of the office door.

"Did the doctor tell you the results?" Father asked.

"Not yet. He told me to come get the result in three days. Let's go buy the medicine he prescribed," I suggested.

"It's unnecessary. I have the pain killers at home. I don't need more medicine. Let's go to the market to buy some meat. You are thinner than before. We haven't eaten meat for months and you really need more nutritious food," Father said and laughed.

So we bought some meat in the market instead of medicine. Three days later, I returned to the doctor's office.

"Your father has stomach cancer," the doctor said quietly.

"How is that possible? He used to be so strong. What should we do next?" I said.

"He needs an operation, but he has heart disease so there are



risks. Without an operation, he may not live longer than eight months at the most," the doctor said.

"How much does the operation cost?" I asked.

"At least 100,000 yuan," the doctor replied.

...

I don't remember leaving the doctor's office. I walked slowly to school in the heavy rain without an umbrella. I was lost in sad thoughts about Father. I did not know how to deal with the situation. A friend who saw me totally soaked asked what had happened. I slowly shook my head. Eventually, I found a telephone, called Brother, and told him about Father's disease.

Brother sighed and later told me to lie to Father.

I returned to the hospital and begged the doctor to make a false report. At first he refused, but moved by my plea he eventually wrote that Father's illness was minor.

I stayed at school for another three days until the weekend and returned home very late that Friday afternoon because I thought I would cry when I lied to Father about his condition.

"The doctor said you had just a minor problem with your stomach, but will recover soon if you take medicine regularly," I lied as I handed Father the report of his endoscopy.

"I told you I was OK. I also have some good news for you. Your brother called and said he would come back this Spring Festival. Your Uncle Big also phoned and promised to send me some money to pay for your school fees. Our life is becoming better and better," Father said while happily cooking dinner.

No longer able to hold back my tears, I hid in my bedroom and wept quietly. Father had interpreted this interest and support from the others as just business as usual. When I recalled the doctor's prediction that Father would live no more than eight months, I felt helpless and weak, not knowing what to do next.

The winter vacation came soon. One day while I was reading at home, Aunt Ping loudly called my name.

I went outside, "What's the matter, Aunt Ping?"

"Your father fell down a slope while herding. Please send him to the hospital immediately," she said.

I rushed to where Father was lying while Aunt Ping called others to help me. With their help, I put Father in a tractor trailer and took him

to the hospital immediately. He had broken a leg. He stayed in the hospital for five days and then we went home by taxi. Father could not walk so I needed to look after him constantly. Spring Festival came, but Brother did not return as he had promised. He had to look after his pregnant wife.

Spring Festival of 2009 was miserable for Father and me. Father stayed in bed for the whole month. Without enough money to prepare New Year's celebration, we bought no meat. On New Year's Eve, Aunt Ping brought us four dishes, but we were too sad to enjoy them.

Father cried. It was the second time I had seen him cry and the first time since Mother's death.

The next morning while I was helping Father wash, I noticed a paper by his pillow. It was the true report of his stomach cancer. As I was wondering how he had obtained it, Father said quietly, "I've known the truth for a long time. You don't need to lie to me anymore."

I didn't know how to respond and confessed everything.

"We couldn't afford the operation. I'm confident about my own body. Let's forget it," Father said, abandoning his hope for life with that one simple sentence.

Feeling very sorry for Father, I burst into tears. He touched my head gently and trying to comfort me said, "Don't worry about me. Life and death are part of nature. Let's face it bravely."

FATHER IN QINGHAI (I)

Father's positive attitude toward life meant that he did not believe he would die in eight months so he largely ignored his health. His biggest concern was me. He worried about how I would live without him and often talked to me about living alone. I guessed he just wanted me to understand basic life skills. After Spring Festival, Father's leg was much better and he could move freely again. He continued to herd and do farming work. Life went on as usual, but I worried in fear his health would worsen.

In school, I was too depressed to focus on study. While pretending to be outwardly fine to others, I constantly thought about my future. I did not want to disappoint anyone. For some relief, I often chatted with classmates. After ten PM when our classes were over, I would walk alone on the playground and feel freer. I was then brave enough to think about my uncertain future and consider all the horrible things in my mind that I dared not think about nor mention to others. Seeing Father still busy making money to support me, I felt more ashamed because I was not trying my best to study even though when I was with him, I pretended to be hard-working.

It had been four months since Father received the cancer diagnosis. During that period, we had not taken any measures to stop the cancer from worsening. Knowing he could not afford the cost of the treatment, Father had been prepared to accept the worst result. Uncle Big had promised to help but he never called Father again.

In the summer of 2009 after his daughter's birth, Brother returned home and tried to persuade Father to go to Qinghai to live with him. Brother was under a lot of pressure, having just bought a truck with a loan and rented an apartment. While Sister-in-law looked after their baby at home, Brother supported the family financially.

Father initially refused Brother's advice because he did not want to add to his burdens.

"Your health is worsening. If you don't come to Qinghai with me, who will look after you? Chao needs to go to school. It's very important for him to study hard now to get into university successfully. If you insist on staying, what will happen if your situation gets worse? I think you also do not want Chao to quit school to look after you," Brother said.

Recognizing that Brother's advice was reasonable, Father agreed finally. He sold his goats and grain and went to the place where he had resolved never to return to again.

Father was born in 1951, the fifth child in his family. My paternal grandparents had one daughter and four sons. The oldest daughter had married and had her second son by the time Father was born. Her second son was the same age as Father and so naturally she sometimes treated him as her child as well as her youngest brother. Father was born in the third year after the foundation of PRC. As the socialist system had not yet been set up, my grandparents lived a decent life as landlords.

Though there were conflicts in northwestern China in the early twentieth century, the wars did not affect our province. Farmers lived the same miserable lives that their ancestors had. Father's grandfather, a businessman, owned a pawnshop in Caihong City. Losing faith in the Kuomintang government's bad financial policies, he returned to his hometown, Phoenix County, with his two sons and bought some land to make a living. The two sons were young and strong and could handle all kinds of farm work. Their life improved. The two sons married and the extended family grew larger. The whole family lived together happily and shared farming work.

When the PRC introduced its policies in 1953, Grandfather was forty, his father was in his seventies, and my father was two years old. The family was put in the landlord category, a label that subsequently caused our family great suffering. The government confiscated property and individual belongings, and land was divided.

Grandfather was assigned to do heavy labor. Having lost all the wealth he had earned through his family's hard work, he suffered both physically and mentally, eventually dying in his forties when Father was not yet five years old.

Grandmother, a woman with bound feet, held back her tears and held a silent funeral. Grandfather's brother was young and his wife did not want to continue living with Grandmother's family. They asked to be moved away from the whole family. Grandmother then needed to care for her aging father-in-law and three young children. The village leader

often treated Grandmother unfairly by assigning her heavier labor duties than other villagers.

Uncle Big was Father's eldest brother. In 1956 he was studying in senior middle school. When he graduated, he applied to study engineering at university, but was refused by the government because of his family background. He was ordered to be a veterinary major and later became a veterinarian in a pastoral area in Qinghai Province where living conditions were very basic.

Father's second brother was an excellent junior middle school student at this time. After passing the senior middle school entrance examination, he was forced to quit school by the village leaders, who said they needed someone to teach in the village primary school. Feeling hopeless about his future he later committed suicide. After her second son's death, Grandmother was inconsolable for a long time.

Uncle Two was Father's third brother. He quit primary school because of the family's poverty and when he was ten years old, started doing heavy farming work. When he was older, the village leaders sent him to learn to forge iron.

Father was raised by his mother and brothers. He often fought children who called him the son of a landlord. Once when he was treated unfairly by his school teacher, he caught a small snake and hid it in the teacher's quilt, nearly frightening the teacher to death. When he was in grade six in primary school, the Cultural Revolution brought Father's school life to an end. Nearly all the schools were closed by the government at that time.

From the age of twelve Father started to work in the village full time. Though he was very young, the village leaders still treated him badly because of his family background. Once, when it was dark, the top village leader, Fayun, knocked on the door and told Father to take a document to another village. Fearing that wolves might attack him, Father refused. Fayun then beat him severely.

Father was famous for his courage. Once when Grandmother was very ill, Father encountered a wolf while traveling to a distant village to ask a doctor's help. It was raining that day and Father was holding an umbrella which he brandished wildly as he shouted. The wolf fled.

Knowing Father was clever and calm when facing danger, Fayun asked Father to escort his son back to his factory. This was during the Cultural Revolution, a time when gunfights were common. Despite this, Father bravely escorted Fayun's son to the factory, without event as it

happened. But on his return, he came across two groups of people trying to kill each other. Father promptly lay down on the earth pretending to be dead, until the fighting was over.

Although Father often did favors for Fayun, he did not appreciate Father much. For example, once during Spring Festival when the villagers gathered to divide pork, the village leaders divided it unfairly, taking more than they deserved. When it was Grandmother's turn to get pork, there was nothing left. Fayun then scolded Grandmother badly and ordered her to leave. Having not eaten any meat for the whole year, everyone in the family had been hoping to taste pork during Spring Festival. Grandmother cried when she got home, empty handed. Enraged at seeing his mother so sad, Father went to argue with Fayun, who just ignored him.

Villagers did not use electricity. When an electric grain mill was introduced to the village, no one knew how to use or repair it. Everyone was afraid of being electrocuted. The village leaders put Father in charge of the electric grain mill. Gradually, Father learned about electricity on his own. Just two days before Spring Festival that same year, a neighboring village invited Father to repair their electric grain mill.

The leader of the village gave Father some pork to thank him. Father was just fifteen at the time, and so was very happy. Holding the pork in his hand he visited all the families in our village, one by one, to show it off.

"Fayun did not give us pork, but I got some by myself. We also have meat for Spring Festival. Look at my pork. It's more than yours. Fuck Fayun! He doesn't bother me at all," Father announced when he entered people's homes.

After turning sixteen, Father felt that, as an adult he should protect the whole family.

One day, when Grandmother was washing clothes in the yard, she heard a noise. When she checked, she found that several men were cutting down a large tree by the front door under the guidance of Fayun.

"What are you doing? Why are you cutting down our tree?" Grandmother shouted.

"The village needs wood to build a cattle enclosure," Fayun answered.

"This is our private tree. It doesn't belong to the public," Grandmother said.

"Who can prove it? You shameless landlord's wife! Go! Get away from us!" Fayun ordered.

"What are you doing? Kill me before you cut that tree," Father's grandfather shouted as he rushed out. He was in his eighties at that time.

"I was planning to cut down this tree to make my own coffin. Now you want to get this tree. Then just kill me now!" Father's grandfather cried.

"This tree was planted by my husband before Liberation. You do not have the right to take it!" Grandmother shouted.

"Before Liberation? Everything belonged to your family before Liberation, but now everything you owned is public property. Do not bother us!" Fayun said, kicking Grandmother away.

The tree was cut down and hauled away.

When Father returned from work, Grandmother told him what had happened to the tree. Furious, Father rushed to Fayun's home with a knife. He pulled Fayun, who was about fifty years old, from his bed and beat him badly. Holding a knife to Fayun's throat, Father ordered him to return the lumber from the tree the next day.

Fayun was scared to death and promised everything. The next day, Fayun arranged for the lumber to be returned and treated Father in a totally different way. Every time he saw Father, he smiled and spoke to him very gently. Father was confused but concluded he had won respect by using force.

Father had a close friend, Tianyun, who often did farm work with him. One day when they were working together as usual, Tianyun said to Father, "Xi, you are in danger. Fayun asked my brother to collect evidence of your trying to murder him. You must flee, or you will be caught and put in prison!"

"No wonder he treated me so strangely. What an evil plan! Thanks! I must go home right now."

At home, Father told Grandmother about Fayun's evil plan. "I must go somewhere to hide or I will be imprisoned," Father said.

"Find your eldest brother in the pastoral area. They won't go there looking for you," Grandmother advised.

Father fled that night with just a little money and some food.



He dared not take a train for fear of being caught by policemen. After walking along mountain paths for several days and climbing over several mountains, he realized that he was in another province and took a train to Qinghai. When he eventually found Uncle Big, he fainted from hunger and exhaustion.

When Father regained consciousness, he tried to explain but Uncle Big said, "Just have a good rest. I know everything. Policemen left just before you arrived."

Later, when Father recovered his health, Uncle Big arranged for him to learn how to operate a tractor. Father was clever and learned quickly.

FATHER IN QINGHAI (II)

Father became a tractor driver and lived with Uncle Big. Later, when Uncle Big was sent to teach in a university in Xining City, the capital of Qinghai, Father lived alone in a pastoral area. He felt very lonely. His neighbors, mostly Tibetan herdsmen, did not farm. The government was trying to encourage them to farm and had sent some Han people with 'bad' family backgrounds to pastoral areas to live together with them. Nai was one of those Han people. Father and Nai lived in the same community, spoke a common language, and thus became good friends.

Nai was older than Father and married. His wife, Cai, was a good cook. The couple often invited Father to share dinner with them, and asked Father to buy things from the city since Father's job was transporting items from the city to the pastoral area. As a driver, Father's salary was high so he was very generous to the couple. When they met trouble, Father often lent them money, never asking for it back. They had a very close relationship.

One day, when Father was eating dinner with the couple, they urged him to settle in their village. "Xi, you have been in this village for seven years. What's your plan for your future life?" Nai asked.

"I don't know. Maybe save some money and return to my hometown after my name is cleared," Father answered.

"Why don't you just settle here and start your own family?" Cai asked.

"I need to look after my mother. She has been ill since my grandfather died three years ago. I'm so sorry I haven't been able to return to see her," Father said sadly.

"In my opinion, you should buy a house and marry a woman here. You are young, but time is passing very fast. When will the charge against you be dismissed? The most important thing for a man is to find a wife and live a steady life. If your mother knows you have married here, she will also feel happy for you," Nai advised.

"He is absolutely right. I know a beautiful girl in the neighboring village. Because of her family's background, they were assigned to live here like us. You know city people can't farm well so they live a very miserable life here. I am sure her parents would be delighted to have you as their son-in-law. If you agree, I will arrange for you two to meet in a few days," Cai said excitedly.

Father agreed. A few days later, Father arrived late for the meeting.

"Xi, you are so late. Why do you make this girl wait for you so long?" Cai complained when Father arrived.

"I'm so sorry. My tractor broke down half way," explained Father.

"This beautiful girl is Lily. Lily, this is Xi, the handsome driver I mentioned to you," Cai started.

"It's you," Lily said, recognizing Father.

"Yeah. What a coincidence!" Father said shyly. He still remembered that day when, while driving on the way to this village, he met a girl who was herding. It was getting dark and seeing that she couldn't control her flock, Father stopped his tractor and helped her round up the sheep. Once the flock was under control, Father left without asking the girl her name.

Lily became my Mother. Since her family had been landlords before the Cultural Revolution, no one wanted to help my maternal grandparents learn to farm. Grandma Wei and Grandpa Wei had three children - mother, Aunt Hong, and Uncle Yuan. They lived a hard life after being assigned to this farming area.

Mother was nineteen when she had lost her heart to the handsome young driver who had helped her. She quickly agreed to marriage.

Father was also pleased with Lily and was ready to settle down. Seeing their daughter had found a driver as a husband, my grandparents were happy to consent.

They married a year later. Father was twenty-four and Mother was twenty. Father also managed to move his grandparents' whole family to the village where he lived.

Two years after their marriage, my parents had their first child, a beautiful daughter whom they named Jun, meaning 'Beauty' in Chinese.

Jun was very cute and lively. When she was just two years old, she started singing. Grandpa Wei was very knowledgeable and often told

Jun all kinds of stories drawn from novels and Chinese operas. Jun was very good at memorizing these. When guests came to visit my parents, she was very polite and fondly entertained them with stories, much to the delight of everyone. When leaving, guests routinely complimented Jun.

When Jun was five, Father got a telegram from Uncle Two saying the charge against him had been dismissed. Father then decided to take Mother to visit his hometown, so, in the summer of 1979, Father returned with Mother, leaving Jun in the care of my maternal grandparents. When they arrived, Grandmother was sick in bed. She was so excited to see her youngest son come back with his wife that she took the bracelets off her wrists and gave them to Mother. Seeing Grandmother crying so often, Father asked what had happened. She explained that Uncle Two and his wife treated her badly. "They are counting on my death soon," Grandmother said sadly.

"I'm so sorry. It's my responsibility to look after you, but I left you here for too long. The government's policy has been changing and political labels were becoming less and less important. Lily's relatives have moved back to Xining City to live. My parents-in-law are also planning to move back to the city next year. Once I buy a house next year, I will bring you to Qinghai to live with us," Father promised Grandmother.

"This is my home. My husband and son are buried here. I won't leave. I understand your life is also not easy. I don't expect you to look after me. Seeing you in such good health and with such a good wife, I am not worried about you anymore," Grandmother said.

"In that case, I'll visit you more often. Here is some money. Please keep it," Father said.

"Don't leave any money for me or your sister-in-law will steal it. She took all the money your eldest brother gave me earlier," Grandmother said.

Having seen the bad situation in which his mother lived, Father decided to take her to Qinghai in the future. On the train back to Qinghai, he kept planning how to move his home from a pastoral area to Xining City. However, more miserable disasters were waiting.

"Jun, Mother is back. Where are you?" Mother called but heard no response.

"Please sit and rest," Grandma Wei said nervously.

"Where is little Jun," Father asked

Grandma Wei started crying.

"What happened?" Mother asked.

"I have been thinking how to tell you, but I still do not know how to tell you the truth. The third day after you left, I was milking while your father was reading books in the house. I thought Jun was playing with your father. He thought Jun was with me. Suddenly, Cai ran into our house hurriedly and said something bad had happened," Grandma Wei said.

"What happened to Jun?" Father shouted.

"She... she... died," Grandma Wei said and burst into loud wails.

"What!" Mother whispered and fainted.

...

Jun had gone to Nai and Cai's house to play with their daughters. Nai had just bought a new tractor several days earlier. Having never touched a tractor before, he was practicing how to drive it. Jun had come into the yard just when Nai lost control of the tractor and crushed her.

Mother was inconsolable and scolded her parents. "Why did you all ignore Jun that day? You are the worst parents on earth. I told you to take good care of her. Now, tell me where she is. Stupid father! You just know how to read your stupid books. What good do books bring you? Not even a piece of bread. You'd better bury yourself with those books when you die. Cold mother, why did you not feel worried when Jun was absent? You are so selfish. You just know how to work to earn money. Supposing it was Yuan, you would have been worried and gone to look for him everywhere. You two are so cruel. You killed my daughter. I want my little Jun back..." Mother screeched while weeping.

Father hesitated but finally went to Nai's house. "I'm here to ask how to deal with my daughter's death," Father said.

"I have no money. I spent all our savings on the tractor. I could give you at most 200 yuan," Nai said.

"It's not our fault. Your daughter rushed into our yard suddenly. We did not invite her!" Cai said rudely.

"How dare you say that. I don't want your stupid money. You owe me and my wife an apology. My wife is very sad. You should confess and beg her forgiveness," Father said angrily.

"We have already apologized to your wife's parents. We've done enough and we have no money for you. If you really need a daughter, take my daughter," Cai said.

Father's heart bled. He had always treated Nai and Cai as his most trusted friends. Infuriated by their rudeness, he slapped Cai to the ground and kicked Nai away when he tried to protect his wife. Father beat the couple badly. Their relationship ended.

In 1980, the policy of Reform and Openness was carried out throughout China. Mother continued scolding her parents about her daughter's death so my maternal grandparents bought a house and moved to Xining City with Aunt Hong and Uncle Yuan. Father was still driving the tractor to transport goods. Mother was left alone in the village. Every time she passed Nai and Cai's house, Mother felt angry. Gradually, she got weaker and weaker, which worried Father a lot. Then a telegram from Uncle Two came, saying Grandmother had died a month earlier. Feeling depressed and lost in his thoughts, Father wasn't paying attention while driving his tractor. He was struck by a truck and suffered several fractures.

Mother came to look after Father in the hospital. He had three operations, which were very costly. Mother then tried to borrow money from her parents, but they were not happy with Mother for her relentless scolding over Jun's death. They said they had just bought a house, and had no extra money to lend to Mother.

"How ungrateful! Have you forgotten the favors Xi did for you? You are why I lost my daughter. Now you want me to lose my husband!" Mother raged.

Uncle Big posted some money for Father's treatment, and after three months in the hospital, Father had recovered to the point he could go home. Meanwhile, Nai and Cai had moved to Xining City to live.

Father is good at numbers so he was chosen to be the commune accountant.

A year later, Mother gave birth to Brother. Just when life seemed back on track, my maternal grandparents bought new troubles.

Uncle Yuan had graduated from university and was sent to be a teacher in a pastoral area. He hated being a teacher. Grandma Wei and Grandpa Wei wanted to bribe some government officers to arrange another job for Uncle Yuan, which required a large sum of money. They turned to Mother for help.

"We have no extra money at all. Brother was just born and I have no income. The whole family counts on Xi's salary, but his salary is so limited that we can hardly make ends meet," Mother said.

"We know you need money, but you have only one brother. His future depends on you. You must help him this time," pleaded Grandma Wei.

"We don't even have enough money for ourselves," Mother said.

"Xi is the commune cashier. He must have a lot of cash in his office," Grandfather Wei said.

"Father, that is public money. We can't use it. Xi won't agree. He follows all the rules. When we need money, he borrows from others. He never touches public money," Mother insisted.

"I know. You mustn't tell him. The commune income is steady. There are few expenses. We'll just borrow the money for several months and return it. No one will notice. You know the government has started returning confiscated wealth to those who were once rich. You know our family used to be very rich. We will get our wealth returned. Please don't worry, we will certainly return the money," Grandpa Wei reassured Mother.

Mother finally agreed. She opened Father's office desk drawer, took out 3,000 *yuan*, and lent it to her parents. A half year later, the commune leaders did an audit. Father was confident because he did not touch the money in his drawer but, to his surprise, he was charged with embezzling 3,000 *yuan*, sentenced, and sent to prison for one year. He never believed it was his wife and her parents who stole the money together.

A year later, when Father was set free from prison, Brother was two years old. Father had lost his job. Not trusting anyone around him, Father eventually decided to move back to his hometown.

"You could stay here and divorce me," Father said to Mother.

"No, I owe you a lot," Mother said.

LONELY LIFE

After Brother took Father to Qinghai, I was alone so I lived in the school dorm. On weekends, my dorm roommates all went back home but I stayed on. Not wanting students to stay in the dorm on weekends the school turned off the power on those days. So I secretly hid in the dorm eating snacks for meals. During the daytime, I did my homework and at night I tried to sleep as early as possible. Loneliness enveloped me. I missed Father, but could only talk to him on the phone once a week because of the telephone fees.

To save money, I found a job in the school dining hall kitchen as the cook's assistant. During lunch, I helped with various chores in the kitchen. After the other students had finished lunch, I started my own lunch. My only salary was a free lunch. The cook was bad-tempered, impatient, and treated me very rudely and impolitely. I dared not make mistakes in front of him. If I made a mistake, I got a very poor lunch. I hated that work very much, but continued because I needed it. I tolerated the cook's abuse and saved my lunch money to talk more with Father on the phone.

Uncle Two promised Father and Brother that he would look after me when they left. In return Father gave Uncle Two our land and the remaining grain. I seldom visited Uncle Two's home because Uncle Two and Aunt Two were like strangers. During National Day holiday, the week-long school break, I thought I could not survive if I continued to hide in the dorm so I went to Uncle Two's home.

When I arrived, Uncle and Aunt Two were busy harvesting corn. They were happy to see me which surprised me because I never thought they might welcome me. I helped them with the harvest for the first three days. We got along very well. I felt they were kind and was deeply moved. As I had grown up in a single-parent family, I had never had the chance to experience the warmth of two parents. Uncle and Aunt Two's concern made my heart feel warm. Although I knew they had done some

bad things to our family, I guessed I had not understood it all fully. I decided to change my perspective.

On the last day afternoon of my stay, I visited Mother's grave and cleaned around it. When I came back to Uncle Two's home, Uncle and Aunt Two were both absent. I entered my bedroom to rest. After a while, I heard them return. They sat in the living room to talk.

"Where is Chao this afternoon?" Uncle Two said.

"He went to tidy his mother's grave," Aunt Two answered.

"Ridiculous! She's been dead for years. What's the meaning of this!" I heard Uncle Two exclaim.

"Yes, and his father is going to his grave soon, too. He'll have a double cleaning job in the future," Aunt Two said.

"Let's try to get him to forget his parents. He should treat us as his parents," suggested Uncle Two.

"I think he is warming to us these days," agreed Aunt Two.

"Our daughter just graduated from primary school and our son did not get into senior middle school. If Chao becomes our son, he might even graduate from senior middle school. If he enters university, we would be the parents of a university graduate. He would then appreciate us and we would get more from him when he finds a job," continued Uncle Two.

"I do not want to use our money to support him to attend university at all," Aunt Two said.

"How stupid! After his father dies, his family house and land will all belong to us. We can then ask money from Uncle Big and his brother with the excuse of supporting him in university. We could ask for a lot," Uncle Two explained.

"The land and house are not that valuable. We will surely have to spend some money on him," complained Aunt Two.

"Don't just focus on the money. You need to pay something even if you feed a dog. The expense is not very important. The most important thing is that if we adopt Chao, the other villagers will respect us more. It will earn us a good reputation, which you can't buy," Uncle Two said and then laughed.

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My heart was bleeding. I suddenly rushed out from the bedroom with my belongings, mortifying Uncle and Aunt Two. They were too embarrassed to say a single word. I rode away on my bike, vowing never

to return. I went to the school but it was closed. Not knowing where to go, I wandered in the street with my bike.

"Hey, Chao. What are you doing here?" shouted Xia, my new deskmate in grade two of senior middle school. Xia was a handsome boy and two years older than me. He was very good at basketball, which won him a lot of admiration from the girls.

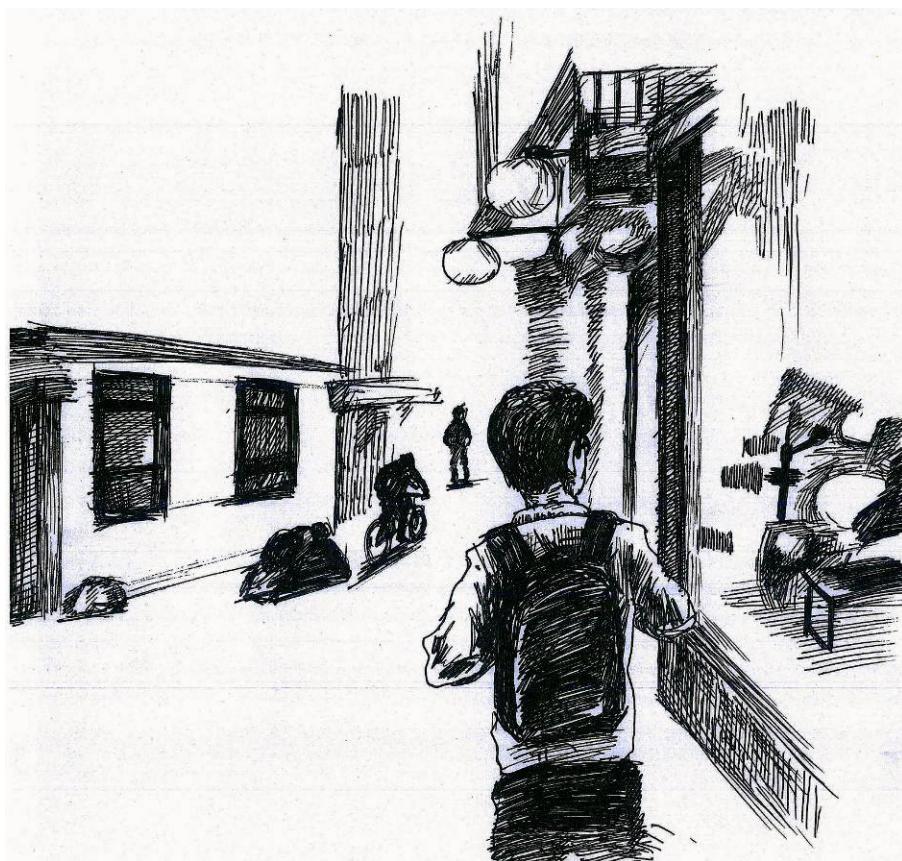
I guess you're dating a girl, right?" Xia said, laughing.

"Don't joke! I'm not as popular with girls as you," I said.

"Ha! True. I'm going to buy some vegetables for my mother in supermarket. See you later," Xia said and waved.

"Hey, can I stay at your home tonight?" I asked Xia loudly.

"What! I mean, of course," Xia said, turning back with a surprised look.



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When I told Xia about my situation he was shocked. He had never noticed that I was different from other classmates. He showed great sympathy and told me his own experience to comfort me.

Xia had well-off parents. His father was a teacher and his mother was a nurse. A naughty child, he often fought other kids. Once when fighting, his head was cut and started bleeding. As the wound was small, he ignored it, and continued his battle with his opponent. The other kids, however, were scared because there was so much blood. When he returned home, his parents were shocked and rushed him to the hospital where a doctor finally stopped the bleeding. Later, when his parents took him to a better hospital in the capital city he was diagnosed with hemophilia. Consequently, he was forbidden to play with others and no longer attended PE class. However, he often secretly played sports, especially basketball. But he was careful when playing basketball, resting every thirty minutes.

Learning about his experience made me feel better. I realized that everyone faced challenges and hardships and that I should be confident in my own struggles. Xia and I became close friends. We frequently studied and played basketball together. On weekends, I often stayed in Xia's home. His parents treated me very kindly, which also relieved my loneliness.

During the first semester of my second year, my grades improved dramatically. I turned my feelings of missing Father into energy that I focused on improving my study. In the final exams of that semester, I even got full marks in math, the only time during my senior middle school years. As winter approached, I yearned to see Father.

RETURN FROM QINGHAI

In 2010, before Spring Festival, I took a train to Qinghai. Father lived in a small apartment Brother had bought. Brother's family lived with Grandma Wei in her home. When I arrived at Grandma Wei's home, Father was waiting for me. As soon as I got out of the taxi, Father rushed over to hug me. In fact, he had been standing for hours outside of Grandma Wei's house, waiting for me, ignoring the cold weather.

Grandmother's only son Uncle Yuan lived in Hainan City, which was far from Xining City. Aunt Hong lived next door. Her husband, Uncle Liu, was a government officer. Aunt Hong and Uncle Liu ate supper in Grandmother Wei's house. At dinner time, Grandma Wei, Aunt Hong, Uncle Liu, Brother, my sister-in-law, their daughter (Yiyi), Father, and I were all there. When I arrived, Grandma Wei was watching TV and Sister-in-law was preparing dinner.

I sat on the sofa and talked with Grandma Wei. Uncle Liu came in and, although I greeted him, he ignored me, which made me recall that he was very arrogant during my first visit to Qinghai.

"Dinner is ready," Sister-in-law announced.

Grandma Wei brought the chopsticks and Father came with the bowls. Uncle Liu sat, unmoving. I stood and wiped down the dinner table.

"Liu, this is yours," Father said and handed Uncle Liu a bowl.

"Just put it down, here," Uncle Liu said coldly, but calmly.

Hearing this, I was angry because it was so rude. I then understood that Father wasn't happy, although when we chatted on the phone he always said he was fine. After dinner when we were back in the small apartment where Father lived alone, we had a long chat. As he told me about his life over the past half year, I increasingly understood how miserable his situation was.

Brother had brought Father to Qinghai and arranged for him to live in a small apartment alone. As Brother was busy making money and

Sister-in-law had an infant to care for, they seldom visited him. Father bought food for himself and went to Grandmother's for supper. When he fell ill, he took some medicine or went to a hospital by himself. Brother did not ask about his health. Twelve months had passed since Father had been diagnosed with stomach cancer. Defying the doctor's prediction, Father was still alive but lived sadly. I felt very sorry about Father's situation and intended to talk with Brother, but he was always too busy with his small business.

On the first day of Spring Festival, Uncle Liu invited the whole family to eat at the biggest restaurant in the city - The Moon and Star Restaurant. Everyone was happy and toasted together. Grandma Wei shed tears at seeing all her family together. She pointed at Yiyi and said to Father, "She looks so much like Little Jun!"

Father nodded.

While enjoying our delicious food, the restaurant manager came over and toasted, "Happy New Year! Thanks for coming to my restaurant on this special day," raising a cup of liquor.

"Manager Nai, happy New Year! We are so honored to have you toast us," Uncle Liu said, smiling broadly.

"Nai!" Father exclaimed in shock.

"Wow, this is Xi, right? How old you seem! I didn't recognize you," Nai, my sister Jun's killer, said while laughing.

"Manager Nai, I didn't realize you knew Brother-in-law. You must give us a discount today," Uncle Liu said.

"No problem," Nai said and turned to Father, "Xi, I was so sorry when I heard about Lily's death. We used to be best friends and I'm very happy to see you here in my restaurant. Let's forget the unhappy things of the past. This dinner is my treat. Have a good time!" he concluded and went on to toast the next table.

"How generous you are, Manager Nai!" Uncle Liu exclaimed happily.

Father said not a single word. Only Grandma Wei could understand his sadness and anger.

"Liu, why did you choose this restaurant?" Grandmother asked.

"Well, this is the finest restaurant in our city. Mr. Nai is the wealthiest person in our city. He is my friend so I knew he would give us a discount. See! Tonight we get dinner for free. It's all due to my close relationship with Mr. Nai."

"Enough! Let's leave!" Grandma Wei said angrily. She stood and we followed her.

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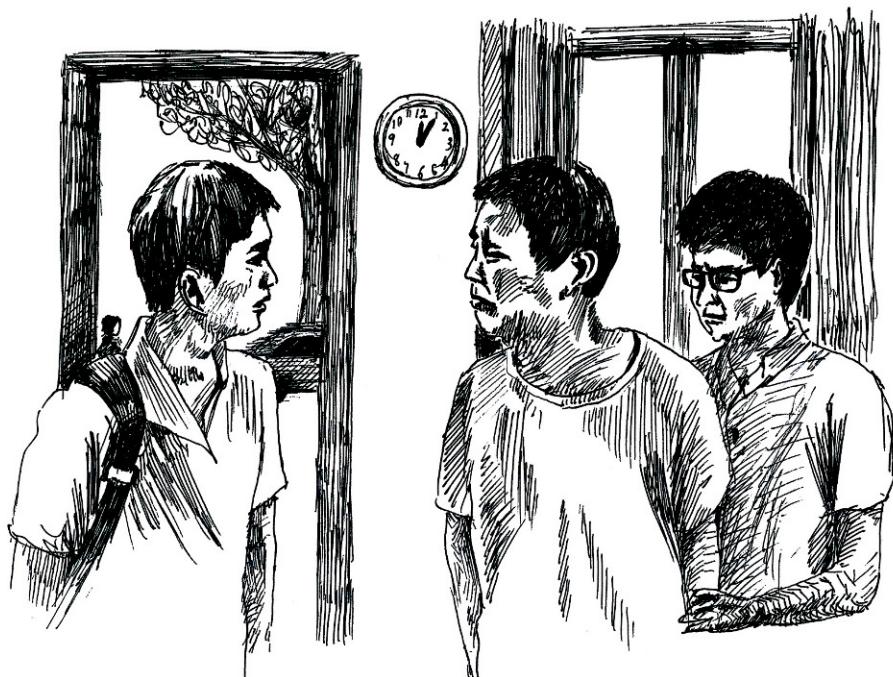
The next day while I was eating breakfast with Grandma Wei, my cellphone rang. It was Father.

"Chao, let's go back home now! I can't tolerate it anymore," Father shouted on the phone.

"What happened? Where are you? I'll come at once," I said.

I rushed to the small apartment but halfway there, I met Father who was carrying two bags and walking hurriedly. Brother was behind him.

They had started quarreling that morning. When Father was preparing breakfast, Brother came to the apartment to fetch something.



"Why do you cook breakfast by yourself? Just come to Grandmother Wei's and eat with us," Brother said.

"I don't want to go there. I can have my own breakfast," Father answered.

"You're so stubborn. Why do you isolate yourself from the others?" chastised Brother.

"I don't think I'm really a member of your family. You don't care for me. You should have treated your brother and me to a meal, since it is the first time we three have spent Spring Festival together in years. But you did nothing. You just make money," Father complained.

"I earn money for the whole family. I need to support my own family and take care of you and Chao. If I don't struggle, what will you eat?" Brother shouted.

"What I eat is all paid for with my own money. I even invested in your vegetable business with the money I got from selling my goats. Don't say you pay for my food," protested Father.

"Fine. Do whatever you want. I'm going to transport vegetables to The Moon and Star Restaurant."

"What? You'll do business with Nai? Do you forget he killed your sister?" bellowed Father.

"Of course I know that! But business is just business. I didn't even know my sister, Jun. Don't live in the unhappiness of the past," Brother retorted.

"You are just like your Uncle Liu, but he is better than you. He at least didn't know about the conflict between Nai and me," continued Father.

"Do you really think Uncle Liu didn't know that? Even Grandma Wei understood that the restaurant belongs to Nai. They just pretended not to know. Nai is very influential in this city. Everyone knows him," Brother said.

Father was so unhappy that he packed quickly and phoned me. Brother had run out of the apartment trying to stop him.

"The situation is too complex. It's better for us to leave," I said to Brother.

"I brought Father to Qinghai because I was determined to look after him," Brother said, insisting Father and I stay until the end of my winter vacation. I persuaded Father to agree promising that afterwards, we would go back home to our village together.

Later when we returned to our village, gossip quickly spread that Father had been abandoned by Brother and his wife, and would die soon. Such rumors did not affect me. No matter how long Father lived, we could spend our time happily together.

Fortunately, Father's health improved after he left Qinghai. He returned to farm work. In the next year, he saved some money and set up gravestones for Grandmother and Mother, returned the loans he had borrowed twenty years earlier when Brother was in the hospital, and even prepared a shroud and a coffin for himself.

BOILING FISH

Father's mood soon improved. He took back our land from Uncle Two and farmed as he used to. As he now had no goats it meant he had less to do, but it also brought financial worry. Father started to find jobs in neighboring construction sites. I urged him not to do labor jobs in fear that his health would deteriorate. But he insisted. Wanting him to be healthier, I often saved money from my daily allowance to buy fish for him.

It was a usual Friday. As I stood in front of the classroom on the fifth floor of the teaching building, I felt like a general occupying a high position before a battle, while my soldiers ran about me on the ground like flowing water. "Hey, let's go. Sorry to make you wait so long time!" Xia said, tapping my shoulder.

On our way to Xia's home, he described his last computer game battle, but I had little interest. I was planning to cook fish for Father that night and wanted to get home quickly. We entered Xia's home. His mother was in the kitchen.

"Please stay and have dinner with us tonight, Chao," Xia's mother said.

"Thank you, Aunt Xia, but I need to get home early," I declined.

"Chao, would you do me a favor?" asked Xia's mother.

"Of course," I promised.

"I know your home is near the mountains. Would you please bring me some wild jujubes? I need some to put in a new dish I'm learning to cook," Xia's mother said.

"Sure! I'll try to find some for you," I said leaving.

The school charged a fee to park bikes in the schoolyard so I parked my bike at Xia's home. Xia's mother was very kind to me so I could not refuse her request. However, gathering wild jujubes was the last thing I wanted to do on weekends. I needed to help Father with housework and prepare food for him. Spending time gathering wild

jujubes in the mountains meant I would have little time for my homework.

I rode my bike to a fish shop in the local market, where I had bought fish several times before.

"Boy, what kind of fish do you want today?" the shop boss asked. He still remembered me.

"Just like the fish last time," I said.

"No problem," he said and scooped a big fish out of his tank.

As he was about to kill it, I said, "Oh, sorry. That one's too big, I need a smaller one." I could not afford the bigger one.

"OK," the boss said and, choosing a smaller fish, chopped and scaled it skillfully, and packed it in a plastic bag.

I paid and rushed home. I had read that fish was good for those suffering from stomach cancer so I decided to spend less from my daily expenditures at school and buy a fish for Father every week. Not knowing much about cooking fish, I often simply boiled it in water with kelp, turnip, caraway, and some salt. It was delicious.

It was the spring of 2010. Trees on both sides of the road were in bloom. I peddled my bike fast and felt I was flying in the beautiful scenery. While passing a construction site, I saw a very old bike just like my family's old dilapidated bike. Life for those workers was so hard. They did heavy labor all day and earned just fifty *yuan*, which would buy only four pieces of fish. Though these laborers were strong now, they would become old and weak one day, and be at risk of contracting all sorts of unforeseen diseases.

As I rode into the village, I saw heavy smoke rising in the mountains. I didn't take much notice because I was focused on cooking the fish. When I got home, I was surprised because the front door was locked. I had imagined Father would be at home, waiting for me. I then guessed Father had gone to the mountains to help put out the fire, so I started to prepare the fish.

I washed the fish several times, put it in a pot of boiling water, and added vegetables and seasonings. I covered the pot turning the fire down low. After half an hour, the fish was ready, but Father was still not back. I was a little worried and went out to look for Father. Villagers who had gone to put out the fire were passing by our house.

"Did you see Father?" I asked.

"No, your father did not help to put out the fire," replied one villager.

"Where did he go?" I murmured.

"He has been on the construction site near the road," another villager suggested.

I should have known. The bike I had noticed on my way home was our own old bike.

"Have you put out the fire?" I asked.

"Yes, the damage is terrible. All the wheat on your land was burned," the villagers said.

I was shocked. That was our only wheat land and we depended on it to provide a good harvest. Later, Father returned on his old bike. He was wet with sweat and looked exhausted.

"Father, I have prepared fish soup for you," I said.

"Thanks. You buy fish too often," Father complained.

I handed Father a bowl of the soup. As he sat on a bench, holding the bowl, he said "You put too much fish in my bowl."

"Father, please don't work on that construction site. The money you gave me is enough for me to live on at school. You don't need to earn more. Your health is what is most important. That kind of heavy labor is really bad for your health," I pleaded.

"Don't worry. I won't go there anymore. The boss said I was too slow and fired me," Father said with a hint of sad anger.

I understood Father had once been very strong. But now, his illness had robbed him of one of the few things that gave him a sense of self-worth. Not knowing how to comfort him, I concentrated on eating.



Father soon went outside, looking very gloomy.
After a while as I was cleaning up, Father came back in very low spirits.

"What's wrong, Father?" I asked.

"I vomited everything in my stomach. You shouldn't have given me so much fish. What a waste," he said and he lay down on his bed.

I finished cleaning and started to do my homework because the next day I needed to gather wild jujubes in the mountains. While I was doing my homework, Father suddenly woke up and said, "I heard there was fire in the mountains. Have they put it out?"

"Yes," I answered hesitantly.

"That's good. It's near our wheat land," Father said relieved and fell asleep again.

I was very sad. Looking at the remaining fish in the pot, I felt life was the boiling water and Father and I were just like the fish.

CHANGES IN MY VILLAGE

In the autumn of 2010, I became a senior three student. If I passed the College Entrance Examination, I would have a chance to be a doctor, teacher, or my dream job - a reporter. If I failed the exam, I would end up doing hard manual labor earn very little, and continue to suffer my whole life. Father understood the importance of this year, and tried his best to avoid bothering me with unpleasant village events.

One night as we were watching the TV news, it was reported that the police had closed a barbershop because it was actually a place of prostitution. The prime culprit was Heng, who was Uncle Two's only son. Uncle Two was the wealthiest man in our village and often boasted how successful his son's business was. Predictably, the next day, all the villagers energetically gossiped about Uncle Two's family.

"He once said his son was the boss of a big company. What a shameful company!" one man said.

"I guess Heng will be sentenced to prison for at least ten years," another villager said with a look of rich satisfaction as though she had been chewing a delicious morsel of fried fatty pork, and was just about to swallow it.

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Uncle Two and Aunt Two were like ants on a hot stove. They wanted to save their son from being sent to prison by bribing officers but they did not know which officer to approach. They soon moved into their son's house in Caihong City to hide from their acquaintances. As Uncle Two was the first leader in our village, we needed to choose a replacement. However, without anyone to organize a vote for a new leader, the local government simply appointed Mei's father, Kewa.

Kewa selfishly used his position to benefit himself, helping himself to whatever resources he had access to. A brickyard adjoining our village took some of our village land and used our village water for free, which reduced the irrigation water for our fields. The brickyard

boss had paid off Kewa so he said nothing about the brickyard's obvious wrongdoing.

Kewa's blatant corruption upset the villagers, but hardly anyone dared challenge him for fear of retaliation. However, Wei Xing's father, Old Wei, the "old scholar" in our village, was angry with Kewa. After Uncle Two left, Old Wei had hoped to be the next village leader, but the local government had appointed Kewa instead. He was very angry about this and decided to do something.

"If they organize a vote, I will win. It's so unfair to appoint a village leader," Old Wei complained to Father.

"The brickyard steals our water. Without much water, our harvest will be low. We must stand up and protect ourselves," Old Wei said.

"What's your plan?" Father asked.

"You go to the water house control room and stop the water. I will bring the other villagers to join us."

"Let's do it," Father agreed.

That day, when the water stopped, the brickyard boss hurried to find Kewa. They went to check the water control room together.

"Uncle Xi, why did you stop the water to the brickyard? This means their production of bricks will be greatly reduced," Kewa said.

"How dare you ask me! You give the water to the brickyard for free. This hurts us because we don't have enough irrigation water." Father said.

"Please turn the valve, now!" shouted Kewa.

"No way, no way. No way..." replied Father just as other villagers were arriving, led by Old Wei.

"You have no right to give our water to the brickyard. The village leader is usually elected by other villagers while you were only appointed because you have a relative working in the government!" accused Old Wei. Kewa and the boss fled because so many men surrounded them. That night, Kewa and the brickyard boss came to our house.

"Uncle Xi, we are here to apologize. Please forgive my rudeness today," Kewa said.

"Yes, yes. We are so sorry for today's rudeness. Here is 500 *yuan* for you. Please forgive us and persuade the others to let me have the water. It's so hard to do this business," the brickyard boss said, trying to hand the 500 *yuan* to Father.

"I did this for all the villagers' benefit, not just for myself. Get out of my house!" Father stormed.

The next day Father went to the water control room and found the valve had been turned on and a big strong man from the brickyard was there to guard it. Father left to have a discussion with Old Wei.

"I have no idea what happened. Just let it go. The water belongs to everyone in the village, not just to you and me. The others have said nothing. Let's not get involved again," Old Wei said.

"Why? You are so fickle. You encouraged me to stop the water. We haven't won. Why should we quit?" Father asked angrily.

Old Wei ignored him so Father had no choice but to return home. On the way, Father encountered Kewa.

"Uncle Xi, you are so stupid. The boss offered you money last night but you didn't accept it. Look how pathetic you are. Old Wei took the money last night. Do you think he will still stand with you?" Kewa said.

Father was very disappointed. They wanted to protect themselves from being treated unfairly by the village leader who cared little about the public welfare. After this incident, Kewa hated Father even more and refused to speak to him. Worse still, Kewa removed my family from the list of those entitled to receive government welfare payments and added some of his own relatives.

The financial aid from the government was important to us. We got 200 *yuan* a month and Father depended on it to pay for medicine. Father looked for help. Because Kewa had relatives in the local government, Father turned to the county government office to try to reinstate the financial aid.

The first time Father reported what had happened, the director said he had no authority to decide Father's case and told Father to leave. The next day Father returned and met the same man who said, "Old man, why have you come again? I told you I could not deal with your affair. Go back to your village and discuss your situation with the village leader," counseled the office director.

"My village leader removed my family from the financial aid list. Would he listen to me?" Father said.

"He must have someone who needed the aid more urgently than you. Accept the villager leader's decision and go back home," advised the director.

"You don't know the truth. He gave the aid to his relatives. They are much richer than me. If you don't deal with this, I will stay here," insisted Father and quietly stayed in the office. No one helped him or even spoke to him. At closing time, the director brought his boss to the office.

"What's the matter, Old Uncle?" this man kindly asked Father.

Father told him everything in detail. The leader was angry about what Kewa had done. He called the town government and ordered them to dismiss Kewa. Meanwhile, he promised Father to keep our family on the welfare list.

After Kewa was dismissed, an officer from the town government came to our village and organized a vote. Old Wei was chosen as the new leader. With great delight, he told others that an officer in the town government was his best friend and he had gotten the village leader position through this man's help. He didn't realize Father had directly helped him.

It turned out that Old Wei was just as selfish as Kewa. He sold some of our village's mountain land and kept the money for himself. He started charging the brickyard a water fee, but it was so high that the boss closed the brickyard, leaving many villagers out of jobs.

While Old Wei was very corrupt, his son, Wei Xing, was addicted to drugs and stole his father's money to buy drugs. He used all his savings to buy drugs. He also borrowed a lot of money at high interest rates from various gangsters. Unable to return the money, Wei Xing was often beaten by these criminals. Old Wei felt great shame because of his son's behavior. Whenever someone mentioned his son, he quickly left.

Villagers often heard quarreling from Old Wei's home late at night. It was mostly the criminals asking for money from Old Wei and his son.

No one felt sorry.

GAOKAO

The Gaokao is the most important exam for students in China. All senior middle school graduates in the whole nation must sit for this grueling examination. Their results are assessed and then the students are classified per their Gaokao results. Unfortunately, it also decides students' social status. The use of exams has a history of nearly 1,500 years, going back to the Sui Dynasty (561-618) when imperial competitive examinations became the most common means by which candidates for government positions were chosen. These exams also provided a dramatic opportunity for poor people to improve their social class. The Gaokao still provides an opportunity for the poor, especially rural students, to improve their lives.

The Gaokao has tests in three independent, compulsory subjects: Chinese, mathematics, and English (which are for both art and science students). There is also one integrated test that depends on the particular subjects students have studied. At the end of the first year of senior middle school students are usually divided into two major groups, science or the arts. For science students, the integrated test includes physics, chemistry, and biology. The arts students' integrated test includes history, geography, and politics.

The Gaokao tests are very challenging. The maximum test mark for each independent subject is 150, thus a maximum of 450 for the three subjects, and 300 for the integrated subject. Therefore, the maximum Gaokao score is 750. Students who score at least 500 have a chance to enter university.

A student's high score adds to their family's social status. For the poor, a high Gaokao score offers their children a chance to change their fate. Since I began school, our teachers repeatedly told us that success in life depended on our Gaokao score. In Father's opinion, success meant getting a government job after graduating from college. So, from the time I entered senior middle school, I knew that to change my life I must

pass the Gaokao and enter university. The more hardships I suffered, the stronger my determination to pass the Gaokao became.

On my first day as a senior three student, I made a study plan and stuck to it:

- 5:30 AM get up and wash
- 6:00-7:00 AM read books and memorize English vocabulary in the classroom
- 7:30-8:00 AM breakfast
- 8:00-12:00 AM class time
- 12:00-12:30 PM lunch
- 12:30-2:00 PM homework
- 2:00-2:30 PM read for entertainment
- 2:30-6:00 PM class time
- 6:00-6:30 PM memorize English vocabulary
- 6:30-7:00 PM dinner time
- 7:00-10:00 PM Gaokao exercises and tests
- 10:00-12:00 PM review classes for the next day
- 12:00 PM go to bed

I also kept a diary to urge myself to study hard. When I felt bored with study or did poorly on tests I wrote some encouraging words. I even counted down the days to the Gaokao so I would feel the urgent pressure. When I spent too much time enjoying myself, I regretted it.

All students who were determined to continue their study in university were strict with themselves. Some had even stricter schedules than mine. Everyone in the classroom was quietly focused on their own study. It was a time with only one purpose and therefore memorable. We were all totally devoted to the struggle to achieve our goal.

Xia was also very hard-working. He was good at math while I was good at English. We helped each other when we studied together at night. When taking a break during study in the evenings, I liked to quietly observe the dark sky. Even though I often ranked among the top three students in the whole grade, I was not confident of my own study. Fear of failure was a constant worry. I felt my future was as uncertain as the dark sky when I considered Father's health and our life in the village. Xia was always a good listener. He encouraged me, saying I should not worry too much about the future, but just focus on the present to get good results. Thanks to him, I regained my confidence

In 2011, the Gaokao was set for June seventh and eighth. Three weeks before, while other students remained in the classroom, I returned home to study. I was so nervous about the coming examination that I could no longer focus on study. I revised my study plan, and relaxed the tight schedule. I then could enjoy studying alone and spent time more effectively.

During the two days of the actual Gaokao, everything went smoothly. I finished the four test papers, feeling all the time like I was in a dream, doing things unconsciously.

Twenty days later, the test marks were put online. I had been successful. My mark was 580. Anyone whose mark reached 520 could enter university. Though I had no chance of getting into the top universities in China, I could still choose from the next fifty universities. We had three days in which to indicate our preferences.

I had no information about how to choose a university. Father was in the hospital and, as he had not finished primary school, he would not be able to help me with my decision. When I phoned my head teacher, he advised me to search online. When I turned to my relatives who were in universities or had graduated from universities, they gave me some basic information. No one was willing to be specific in case they gave me wrong information that would prevent me from entering a university at all. Finally, I called Xia, who had scored 570. He shared the information his parents had obtained, and with this help, I made my choices for university.

My next most important concern was tuition fees. I knew I would have to find these fees myself. Brother was happy about my Gaokao mark, and promised to support me, but I knew his financial situation was precarious. To support me in university would be an added burden. Then my head teacher phoned and told me about a government policy on loans.

Just after I handed in the application for financial aid, Uncle Big phoned, "Chao, which university did you choose?" Uncle Big asked.

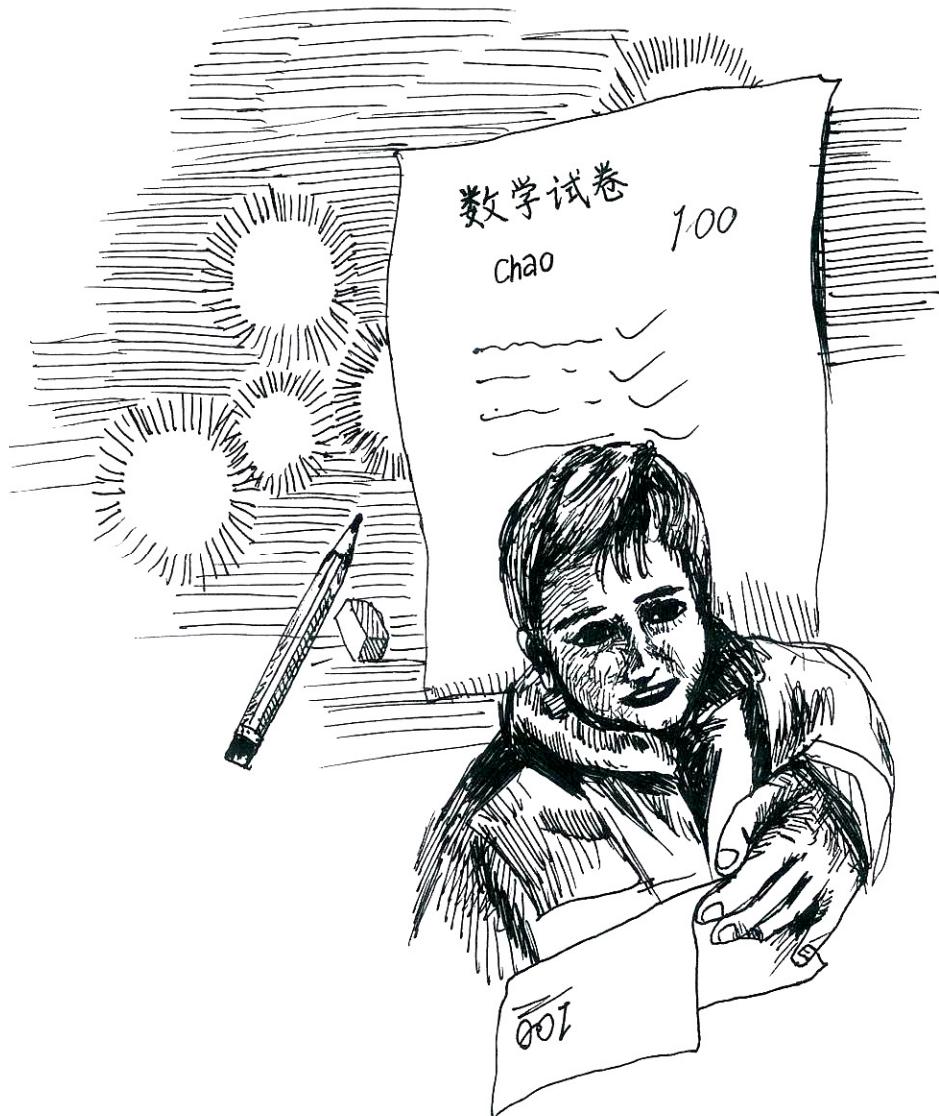
"A university in Beijing," I answered.

"Don't choose a university in Beijing. Instead, choose a teaching university that requires no payment," Uncle Big said.

"But I don't want to be a teacher at all," I declared.

"OK. Where do you plan to get your tuition fees? If you don't follow my advice then just choose whatever you like, but don't count on my financial support," Uncle Big said abruptly, and hung up.

I was shocked. Uncle Big's concern seemed to be that I would ask him for money. For as long as I could remember, he had repeatedly promised that he would support me to attend university. I was thoroughly disappointed by all my relatives.



ROUGH TIMES BEFORE GOOD TIMES

After the Gaokao the days were relaxing. Without any study pressure, I enjoyed myself a lot, playing computer games, hanging out with friends, and doing part time jobs.

Later, Father's health deteriorated. He often had stomachaches. With the 2,000 *yuan* Brother had sent me for my university tuition, I accompanied Father to the hospital in Phoenix County Town. While Father was hospitalized, I filled out college application forms online. I was not overly worried, because the doctor said Father's cancer had not progressed further. Imagining my future university life, I started to make several plans. Now that I was going to university, the villagers treated me more respectfully. Father also got compliments from others that, though he was poor, he had sent his son to university. I felt happy knowing I had won praise and glory for Father.

To save money for my coming university life, I decided to find a part-time job in Phoenix County Town after Father returned home from hospital. I wanted to tutor students who needed help with their study. The challenge was to publicize the fact that I was a qualified tutor. I wrote an advertisement for myself and printed fifty copies. At night when there were few people in the street, I pasted it on the walls of various shops and supermarkets where I thought it would be noticed. I could not do it during the daytime because it was illegal and I would be fined if I was caught. To enable me to do my illegal self-promotion I had asked to stay at Xia's place for two nights as my home was far from Phoenix County. I then waited for customers to contact me at home, but no one did. Feeling anxious, I returned to Phoenix County by bike to check on my posters. Most had been removed by cleaners. Then, as I was passing a book store, I noticed a lady in a beautiful dress reading my advertisement on the wall.

"Excuse me, I'm the student mentioned in the advertisement. Do you need a tutor for your child?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm just considering it," the lady mused.

"Could you give me a chance to try? If you think I'm unqualified, I won't charge you anything," I offered hopefully.

"OK, please come to my home and give my daughter a lesson for an hour. I'll then decide if I should employ you," the lady said.

This woman was Dr. Gao who worked in the hospital where Father used to be. She was very kind. After observing my tutoring, she decided to employ me for twenty days. She even paid me more than I had initially requested. Her twelve-year-old daughter was clever and hardworking. At the end of my work, Dr. Gao praised me and promised to provide any help I needed.

Next I met Mr. Yang, who was introduced to me by my English teacher. Mr. Yang worried about his fifteen-year-old stepson, Shuaishuai, who paid no attention to his study. He had asked his cousin, my English teacher, to find a tutor. My first lesson with Shuaishuai was unpleasant. He paid no attention to me at all. We wasted a lot of time. I wanted to be a responsible teacher rather than just make money from my students' parents so I told Mr. Yang that his son would not cooperate. Informing me that all of the many teachers he'd found had given up, Mr. Yang asked me to try for a few more days and I agreed.

Shuaishuai was an unusual teenager whose biological father was in prison. He really wanted to visit him. Understanding his sadness, I told him stories about Father and me. He was moved and this seemed to change his negative attitude towards me. We became good friends and got along well. When I finished my tutoring assignment, I had a quiet talk with Mr. Yang and confided Shuaishuai's strong desire to see his biological father.

To my surprise, Mr. Yang understood his son's feelings and promised to take Shuaishuai to see his biological father later. He even invited me to come along. The day we entered the prison to see Shuaishuai's father was unforgettable. Shuaishuai wept when he hugged his father, who was also moved to tears.

"Son, listen! I made mistakes. I did not listen to my parents. You should listen to your parents' advice and be grateful. I hope to see you become a righteous man one day," the man told his son.

Shuaishuai behaved better than before and grew to love his stepfather. Mr. Yang praised me and sent me a suitcase, knowing I would enter university soon. He told me to ask him for help whenever I encountered troubles.

Just when I was feeling good about life, the results for university admission were posted online. I had not been admitted to enter the university I had chosen. I was devastated. I felt I had awoken from a wonderful dream to find everything gone. That night I did not sleep until four AM. Then I had a dream:

It was spring and the school campus was covered with a myriad of blossoms. We were in the classroom. The head teacher entered, smiled at me, and said, "Welcome back to school, Chao."

"I should be in university. Why am I here?" I asked my deskmate. But it was not Xia; it was a stranger. I looked around and found all the students were also strangers.

"Where is Xia?" I shouted.

"Xia is in Peking University," the head teacher said.

"I don't belong here!" I bellowed and rushed out of the classroom to find Xia waving goodbye from the sky, while smiling at me. Suddenly, Xia's face turned into Uncle Big's face, who said, "I told you!" I just turned my head back to the classroom and saw that my desk was covered with dust and unfinished papers.

"Oh, nooo..." I moaned. I was so frightened and woke up.

"What's wrong, Chao? Did you have a nightmare?" asked Father, rushing into my bedroom. He was also tortured by the disappointing news and had stayed awake that night, thinking about what I should do next.

"I'm OK. Don't worry, Father," I said.

"Everything will become better in time. I have faced all kinds of misery. At those times, I felt hopeless and weak, but everything turned out to be fine as time passed," Father said reassuringly.

"Thank you, Father, I will consider what I should do next," I said.

"Fine. No matter what your choice is, I will respect and support you," Father said.

Seeing Father's lined, care-worn face, I regretted adding to his worries. Although tortured by pain from stomach cancer, he had not lost hope. He still took responsibility for me.

The next day, I decided to return to school and prepare for the next year's Gaokao. Realizing I was not in university, some villagers gossiped that I had not passed Gaokao and had lied about my marks. My former classmates pitied me. Xia entered a university in Beijing and

kindly left his reference books for me. He said he would wait for me in Beijing.

"I'm sorry, Father, that I let you down," I said.

"Don't apologize. I'm lucky to have you with me for another year. I'm not sure when my life will end, but I promise I will insist on living this coming year for you. Let's struggle together!" exclaimed Father humorously.

SECOND GAOKAO PREPARATION YEAR

And so it happened that in September 2011, I started my second year of Gaokao preparation. I was welcomed back by school leaders who thought I would get better grades on the next Gaokao. As a reward for those who had passed Gaokao but had returned to improve their grades, the school gave us free dorm use and books. My new classmates were just like me, students who had failed to get into university after their first Gaokao attempt.

Our head teacher was an experienced teacher who excelled at teaching politics. Nevertheless, in the beginning I felt bored with the subjects because I thought there was nothing new. Later, remembering I was there to improve my grades, I began to focus and wrote a strict new study plan.

Our head teacher asked every student to write down the name of their most desired university on a piece of paper and put these up on the classroom notice board to encourage everyone to study hard. I wrote Peking University. Although I was not confident, I still believed that I had a good chance to pursue my dream. Sometimes I felt lonely without someone to share this with. This changed when I was appointed class monitor by our head teacher and then had many opportunities to meet the other classroom monitors.

Once when we were having a meeting together, a boy who was late came up to me and said, "My name is Sui. I'm the monitor of class twenty."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Chao and I'm the monitor of class twenty-one," I replied.

Gradually, Sui and I became good friends. Sui was a "left-behind" child who became a "left-behind" teenager. The so-called "left-behind" children are those whose farmworker parents have had to leave them behind in their hometowns while the parents go to cities to earn money. In China, because of the income gap between the countryside and the

city, many farmers find it extremely hard to make a living from agriculture so they go to big cities to earn money. They live in these cities year-round. Their living conditions are poor. They can't afford the cost of education for their children in cities and consequently, most of their children live with their grandparents who are too old to educate them properly.

Many left-behind children often quit school at a very young age and go to cities by themselves to earn a living just like their parents. No longer having parental guidance, some of these children become indifferent to their parents; they develop solitary personalities. The grandparents are unable to control the children's bad behavior and some become criminals.

Those without grandparents usually live alone with the help of some close relatives. In some mountainous areas, to live independently, some left-behind children even get married at the age of eleven or twelve.

Sui used to be a left-behind child who lived alone with his uncle's help. When he became a left-behind teenager, he was also responsible for looking after his younger sister who was in primary school. Sui rented a room near the school and lived there alone. When he needed help from adults, he turned to his uncle although he did not like his uncle at all because he often scolded him wrongly. His parents came back home only for several days during Spring Festival and would leave him some money to buy necessities. Sui's father was bad-tempered and often beat Sui's mother after getting drunk. Sui hated his father. When I talked about my experiences with Father, Sui envied our good relationship.

After we became friends, we often cooked meals together in his rented dormitory and spent time together. Sui's study was terrible. He had only a slim chance to pass the Gaokao. I helped him, but he generally ignored anything related to study. When I asked what kind of job he wanted, he said he guessed he would do farming work like his parents.

As class monitor, to give students some relief from the Gaokao pressure, I often organized activities like singing or watching comedies together during class meetings. Tiemei was a good singer. Every time when had a meeting, Tiemei would be invited to sing to the other students.

Tiemei was pretty and had a good sense of humor. She could make others laugh with just a few words. She was also a left-behind child. When she was in primary school, her parents went to Shanghai, leaving her with her mother's sister, since her grandparents were all dead. After two years in her aunt's home, she was sent to her father's brother's house. She felt like a relay baton, passed between relatives. She had lost a sense of family. Once, when I was studying in the classroom at night, I heard someone crying outside. I went out and found that it was Tiemei, crying on the steps.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing." she said.

"Why do you say that? Maybe you are stressed because of the exam. Talk with me, if you like," I said.

Tiemei said that she missed her parents and was lonely. Her relatives had treated her coldly and were cruel to her. She had then rented a room and lived alone. Every time she saw others going home on weekends, she felt lonely and wanted her parents to come back.

Her tears reminded me of the time when I had lived alone in the school dorm on weekends after Father went to Qinghai. I understood her feelings quite well. I told her about my own experiences and troubles to make her feel better.

When she knew Father suffered from stomach cancer, she insisted on buying something. I refused, promising to tell her immediately if I needed help.

Time went fast and unlucky 2011 finally ended. During Spring Festival, Brother and Sister-in-law did not return as she was pregnant again. I was busy preparing for the coming college entrance exam so I did not spend much time enjoying the winter holiday. However, as it is a time when those working in cities returned to be with their families, I guessed Sui and Tiemei must be enjoying themselves.

In May 2012, Sister-in-law gave birth to a son who had a congenital disease. Brother and Sister-in-law were very sad. They spent all their savings trying to save this baby. Father was also very worried about Brother's family and sent most of our own savings to help save the baby. But after being treated for about a month, the baby died. Sister-in-law was so sad that she could not eat or drink for days. Father was also very sad, but coped.

As the wheat ripened, Father and I were busy harvesting even though there was just a week left before the Gaokao. Unwilling to

jeopardize my Gaokao chances, Father asked me leave the heavy farm work for him and to focus on my studies. Then, one afternoon while harvesting, Father fainted. I rushed him to the hospital with the help of other villagers.

The doctor said Father urgently needed a transfusion. The hospital had no blood at that time so I needed to find blood. I was not able to donate my own blood as I was blood type B while Father's was A. I phoned Sui and asked him see if any of our classmates with A blood could donate for Father. As the Gaokao was imminent, most students willing to donate blood were stopped by their parents who worried that it would affect their health. Finally, Sui and Tiemei volunteered, and arrived.

"I'm so thankful to see you!" I exclaimed.

"You are welcome. It is glorious to donate blood," Tiemei said humorously.

"Let's do it," Sui said.

Thanks to Sui and Tiemei, Father was saved and quickly improved. I took part in the Gaokao again while Father was in the hospital. After the examination, I felt great relief and hoped Father would recover soon. Two weeks later, Father came home and seemed much better.

This time I scored 608. However, I decided to choose the teachers' training university Uncle Big had recommended because it was free. I knew Brother had used up his savings on the infant and Father would need money for medical care. I have never regretted my choice of university.

Sui did not pass the Gaokao and went to work in Shanghai, just as he had predicted. Fortunately, Tiemei entered a university in the same city as me.

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THE DESERTED VILLAGE

In September 2012, I entered Yongzhou Normal University, one of China's top teacher training universities where most students study for free. Every teaching-major signs a contract with the government to be a teacher for at least ten years following graduation in return for free education and a daily living allowance. I accepted this arrangement, because it was the only way for me to get a university education.

When I began my university life, I thought that because I was an excellent student in senior middle school and my Gaokao marks were high compared to other classmates, I did not need to take study seriously. I was totally wrong.

I was an English major, but my base in English was much worse than other students. While I could read and write, my speaking and listening skills were poor. I had great difficulty speaking English and understanding our foreign teachers' instructions in class. Gradually, I decided I was unsuited to be an English major and avoided chances to speak English in front of others. This made my study situation worse. I lacked confidence and did not talk with my classmates often.

To lessen my loneliness, I found all kinds of part time jobs. One job was a part-time English guide position in a history museum. I was interviewed and passed this first step successfully. The final interview was to be held three months later. In the meantime, I was given nearly 300 pages of complex information about relics in the museum to memorize. For the next three months, every morning and evening, I memorized and reviewed this information. I thought it was a good chance for me to prove myself. In the end, I passed the final interview and got the part-time job.

I liked this job and it allowed me to talk with others in English more often, which improved my confidence. Gradually through this experience, I realized that I could improve my study through hard work.

Apart from finishing homework on time, I also visited my foreign teachers during their office hours, which also helped my English.

Rose was in her sixties and energetically devoted to helping students. To encourage students to speak English often, she organized movie nights and a reading group in addition to her regular office hours. I often visited her and told her my thoughts about life and the troubles I had encountered. Her own rich life experiences and advice were very useful. The most important inspiration from Rose was her selfless attitude toward life.

I had dreamt of being a reporter because I imagined I could travel a lot and witness big events. I was not sure if I could be a good teacher. However, Rose showed me that a career as a teacher was great, because I could inspire others. Life goals should include satisfaction and happiness.

Another very helpful teacher was Mr. Jones, a handsome man in his thirties. He was always polite to others and treated his students equally and patiently. One time while feeling extremely stressed with Father in the hospital again, I met Mr. Jones and his baby son on campus. I told him my troubles and thoughts.

"Chao, I understand your feelings, but there are many things we cannot control. You should find a sense of security in your life that can only come from your inner heart not from outside," counseled Mr. Jones.

My university life gave me confidence for my future. Having suffered so many hardships in my life I used to think I should achieve great fame and earn a lot of money. Now, I realized fame and wealth were not that important. I should enjoy my own life, enjoy the positive, and deal with the negative experiences.

In 2015, I was twenty-three and no longer a child who smiled at everyone after his mother's death. Most of my fellow villagers had moved to cities. The village lanes were overgrown with weeds. Some houses had collapsed. Our adobe-wood house still stands. Father still lives in this house, which seems as old as he is.

"Where are the children?" asked Mei's grandmother at the village entrance. This old hare-lipped lady who used to gossip a lot was now suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

"They have grown up, Grandmother. They will come see you one day," I answered.

"Who are you? Are you here to see me?" she asked.

"I'm Chao, do you remember? My home is here," I said.



...

In the year 2016, only twenty people lived in the village. They gathered, sat, and gossiped together. Otherwise not much was happening. Aunt Ping who had protected Wan Lin's girlfriend from being found by her husband, had died three years earlier from lung cancer. Wan Lin had divorced his wife and moved to another village. Mei's whole family went to Shanghai to work, leaving her grandparents in the village. Old Wei became seriously ill after his son was caught and imprisoned.

The whole village was like an old person who had experienced happiness, pain, birth, death and had, in the end, been deserted by their children. The village used to be full of shouts, laughs, fights and the sounds of cooking. I felt like the last baby bird left in the nest.

Father was in bad health just as I had anticipated. After I went to university he had lived alone. He still needed blood transfusions every month. Brother drove his own car back home to spend Spring Festival with us.

When I saw Father's weak face in the hospital, I felt sad. He used to be so strong that he could lift a boulder easily. Holding his hand, our good memories came to my mind. He used to dance joyfully when I got full marks on exams. On the first day, I entered senior middle school he told others proudly, "This is my little son!"

When I failed the university entrance exam the first time, he challenged me, "Let's struggle together for another year!"

Now, seeing his pale face I cried.

"Don't be sad for me, I won't die before you marry," he said.

"OK. You promised!" I exclaimed and laughed.

"Promise to bring your girlfriend to see me before you graduate from university," he said and laughed as well.

Just as I was going to answer him, my cellphone rang. It was a message from the Everyday Express Company informing me that an express package from another province had arrived and needed to be collected before noon,"

What perfect timing! I knew it was a gift for Father from my girlfriend.

CHINESE TERMS

B

Beijing 北京

C

Cai 蔡

Caihong 彩虹

Chang 畅

Chao 超

Cheng 成

D

Dan 丹

Dongpo 东坡

Dr. Gao 高

F

Fayun 发运

Feng 峰

G

Gaokao 高考

Guangzhou 广州

H

Hai 海

Heng 亨

Hui 惠

J

Jialing 家梁

Jiangang 剑罡

Jianlin 剑霖

Juan 娟

Jun 俊

K

Kewa 科娃

L

Lily 李丽

Luo 骆

M

Mei 眉

Meng 梦

Ming Le 茗勒

Miss Su 苏

Mr. Miao 苗

Mr. Pu 蒲

Mr. Shi 石

Mr. Yang 杨

Mr. Zhang 张

Mrs. Li 李

Ms. Liang 梁

N

Nai 乃

P

Pan 潘

Pang 庞

Peng 鵬

Ping

Q

Qi 奇

Qinghai 青海

S

saozi 褴子

Shaanxi 陕西

Shandong 山东

Shanghai 上海

Shenzhen 深圳

Shuai 帅

Sui 遂

T

Tian 田

Tianyun 天韵

Tiemei 铁梅

W

Wan Lin 纨麟

Wan Zekun 万泽坤

Wei 伟

Wei Xing 魏驿

X

Xi 喜

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